RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Backlash after Quotas: Moral Panic as a Soft Repression Tactic against Women Politicians

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## Abstract

Advocates of gender quotas emphasize their transformative potential for women's political participation. Yet evidence on the symbolic effects of quotas remains inconclusive, with some studies uncovering significant backlash after implementation. Although elite resistance to quotas has been posited as an explanation, the underlying mechanisms generating negative effects remain underexplored. This study proposes the utilization of "moral panic" by elites as a mechanism of resistance. By leveraging their media influence and employing conservative moral rhetoric, elites engineer moral panic, framing women's political engagement as detrimental to social order and gender hierarchies. Such panic aims to incite public opposition and rationalize elite resistance to progressive changes. Notably, this tactic is more prevalent in countries with reserved-seat quotas, where elites possess limited control over electoral outcomes. Using an original dataset encompassing politician names and genders, I analyze over 150,000 news articles from 2000 to 2021 across 10 sub-Saharan African countries. The findings indicate that quota-induced gains in women's representation are followed by significant increases in conservative ethical language in news coverage of women politicians, particularly in countries with reserved-seat quotas. These findings bear important implications for gender equality in politics and shed light on the dynamics of backlash after quota implementation.

**Keywords:** electoral gender quota; backlash; moral foundations theory; moral panic; soft repression; women descriptive representation

## Introduction

Electoral gender quotas are celebrated as one of the most extensive electoral reforms worldwide aimed at bolstering women's presence in legislative bodies, with more than 130 countries currently implementing some type of quota

(Hughes et al. 2019). Scholars argue that higher political inclusion of women could have positive attitudinal and behavioral (or symbolic) effects by reducing bias against women's leadership capability, legitimizing them as political actors, and improving the political engagement of women in society (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; O'Brien and Piscopo 2019; Pitkin 1967; Tripp, Konaté, and Lowe-Morna 2006).

However, the nascent literature on the symbolic effects of quotas presents a conflicting picture. Although some evidence supports the positive symbolic effects of quotas (Beaman et al. 2009; Burnet 2011; De Paola, Scoppa, and Lombardo 2010; Yoon 2011), several studies have found that quotas have had minimal or no effects in terms of reducing gender bias or improving engagement among women (Clayton 2015; Kerevel and Atkeson 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Lloren 2014; Zetterberg 2009). In some cases, backlash effects have emerged after the implementation of quotas (Burnet 2011; Kerevel and Atkeson 2017), normalizing "new forms of oppression" against women (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020, 16).

This backlash can have dire consequences, from eroding public perception of women's leadership abilities to fueling violence against women politicians, diminishing women's interest in politics, and hindering broader gender role transformations (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Krook and Sanín 2016; O'Brien and Piscopo 2019). Some scholars suggest that backlash is generated due to the resistance of elites against transformations brought about by quota reforms and women's growing foray into politics that threaten their power and privileges. These elites leverage cultural mechanisms to maintain the political status quo (Krook 2016). These mechanisms, however, remain understudied and give rise to calls for further research (Krook 2016; O'Brien and Piscopo 2019).

Using insights from moral psychology — specifically moral foundations theory — and media studies, I argue that elites leverage the cultural mechanism of moral panic to counter the transformative impacts of quotas (Cohen 1991; Krook 2016). Through their definitional power and influence over media, dominant actors such as conservative civil society groups (Larok 2018) employ moral rhetoric to accuse women politicians of violating conservative values, subverting gender hierarchies, and endangering social order (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Faludi 1991; Payne and de Souza Santos 2020).

Elite moral rhetoric has a significant influence on people's opinion and attitudes (Clifford and Jerit 2013) and thus motivates the public's opposition against progressive policies and women's political participation by engendering fear and outrage. The moral panic, therefore, serves to undermine the effectiveness of quotas and justifies the elite's resistance to changes (Krook 2016). Moreover, this rhetoric reinforces existing gender norms and values. Therefore, I anticipate an increase in the salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians as more women enter politics following quota implementation.

However, there are different types of quota systems — reserved-seat, voluntary party, and legislated candidate — that are adopted under different political, institutional, and international contexts and provide elites with varying levels of control over electoral outcomes. I argue that elites are more likely to leverage

moral panic in countries where they have less control over the electoral outcomes. I investigate this expectation by focusing on reserved-seat and party quota models that provide elites with the least and most control to manipulate electoral outcomes (David and Nanes 2011; Krook, O'Brien, and Swip 2010; Rosen 2017; Tamale 2003). I expect women politicians in countries with reserved seat quotas to face stronger backlash and therefore the salience of conservative moral rhetoric to be higher compared to countries with party quotas.

Focusing on 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, I explore my theory by analyzing the association between the salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians and quota-induced increases in the descriptive representation of women. Using an original dataset on the gender of politicians in these countries, I obtain more than 150,000 newspaper articles published between 2000 to 2021 and extract conservative moral language from them using automated content analysis. Then I pair the moral language measure of each article with the gender of the politician discussed in the article, country-level data on women's descriptive representation, and quota implementation in a cross-national and longitudinal design.

The results confirm my expectations. Findings indicate that quota-induced gains in women's representation are followed by significant increases in the conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians. This effect, however, is influenced by the type of quota system. In countries with reserved-seat quotas, there is a higher proportion of conservative language in the elite's rhetoric about women politicians compared to countries with party quotas.

The present study contributes to the literature on the backlash against women politicians following the implementation of gender quotas in two ways. Firstly, it identifies elite-engineered moral panic as a mechanism of resistance against women's political participation. By creating moral panic through the strategic use of moralizing rhetoric, elites evoke negative emotions among the public (Ryan 2014, 380), thereby undermining the potential behavioral and attitudinal effects of quotas. Secondly, this study provides a framework for future research to explore similar mechanisms of resistance in different contexts and regions.

## Symbolic Representation and Gender Quotas

Throughout history, women's exclusion from politics has resulted in their underrepresentation and the perception of their lacking leadership capabilities (Mansbridge 1999). Symbolic representation scholars argue that increasing gender parity in politics is essential to challenge this perception and generate a "social meaning" of women's governing capacity (Mansbridge 1999). A higher political inclusion of women is expected to challenge gendered perspectives about politics (Burnet 2011; Karp and Banducci 2008; Mariani, Marshall, and Mathews-Schultz 2015), improve beliefs about their leadership capabilities (Alexander 2012; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012), and transform traditional gender roles and norms in society into more egalitarian ones (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Mansbridge 1999). It also gives existence to and constructs the women constituency (Bourdieu 1991; Lombardo and Meier 2014).

To address the underrepresentation of women in politics, electoral gender quotas have gained worldwide recognition as an accelerated pathway for improving gender parity (Hughes et al. 2019). Quota policies require a specific proportion of legislative seats or electoral lists to be allocated to women and have been successful in bolstering women's presence in political bodies (O'Brien and Piscopo 2019). The implementation of quotas has had a significant impact on the diversification of national legislatures worldwide, with the representation of women rapidly increasing from 13% to 25% over the past 20 years (Clayton 2021), although the success of quotas varies depending on their type. Notably, in Africa, the percentage of women in the legislatures of 15 countries (out of 48 worldwide) has reached 30% or more (Bauer 2021).

However, the evidence regarding the symbolic effects of quota reforms is inconclusive and, at times, contradictory. Although scholars have argued that quota reforms can "reshape attitudes, values, and ideas towards women's roles in politics" (Kittilson 2005, 29), the impact varies. Some studies have found general proof of positive behavioral and attitudinal effects, such as women seeking political power in other formerly traditionally male-dominated positions like chiefs in Botswana (Bauer 2016; Matemba 2005) and improved perceptions of women as political actors in Rwanda (Burnet 2011), Indian villages (Beaman et al. 2009) and municipalities in Italy (De Paola, Scoppa, and Lombardo 2010).

However, several studies have found limited or no evidence of the quotas' positive symbolic effect in terms of political engagement, efficacy, or evaluations of women's capability to lead (Clayton 2018; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Zetterberg 2009). In some cases, implementing quotas has resulted in a backlash. For instance, political engagement among women decreased following the implementation of gender quotas in Mexico (Kerevel and Atkeson 2017). Similarly in Lesotho, women in districts reserved for female representatives were significantly less engaged with politics, and quota adoption created a backlash effect against women elected through affirmative action (Clayton 2015). The backlash effect in Rwanda manifested itself in the form of increased marital discord and resentment among men, with some perceiving that gender role upheaval undermined the institution of marriage (Burnet 2011). Similarly in Kenya, women politicians experienced a "patriarchal backlash" after quota implementation, leading to the emergence of new forms of oppression and violence against women in politics (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020).

The significant implications of backlash for the success of quota policies highlight the need to comprehend the underlying mechanisms through which it manifests in society. However, the existing evidence on conservative backlash is limited and predominantly relies on single-country case studies that do not investigate its underlying mechanism (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2022; Muhammad, Awan, and Hussain 2020). Drawing on moral psychology, media studies, and theories of backlash, this study adopts a comparative and longitudinal approach to present a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms of backlash against women politicians after the implementation of gender quotas.

## Transformative Effects of Quotas and Backlash

Scholars have conceptualized backlash as the "dynamic resistance" (Mansbridge and Shames 2008) of dominant groups who experience a decline in their power (Lipset and Raab 1978, 29) due to the "intrusion" and challenge of historically excluded and marginalized actors. Backlash seeks to protect elite interests, values, and status by diminishing the real or perceived gains of marginalized groups and restoring social conditions to their prior state when the "do-not-cross" boundary of existing power hierarchies had not been breached and structural inequality was normalized (Alter and Zürn 2020; Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2021: Rowley 2020; Townsend-Bell 2020).

Quota reforms and the subsequent empowerment of women in politics can be perceived as a threat by the elites who benefit from existing power arrangements (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Krook 2016; O'Brien and Piscopo 2019). These policies transform the political landscape by reforming political structures and increasing women's access to leadership positions within political parties and the executive branch. These positions enable women elected through quotas to exert influence over policymaking, engage in negotiations, and foster collaborations with other lawmakers. Countries with electoral gender quotas are more likely to see the emergence of women's legislative caucuses, which provide a platform for engaging with feminist civil society and driving legislative reforms on women's rights issues. Additionally, the implementation of gender quotas disrupts traditional networks and selection criteria that have historically favored men over women (Adams, Scherpereel, and Wylie 2019; Barnes 2012; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Zetterberg 2013).

In reaction to these challenges to the political status quo and in an attempt to protect their privileges, elites seek to delegitimize women as political actors, keep them "subordinated within the political system" (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020, 19), and even force them to withdraw from the public sphere of politics (Krook 2015). Backlash may take different forms. The elites may intentionally challenge or refuse to comply with affirmative action policies (Lang 2015; Lee and Shin 2016), resort to overt force such as violence or threats of violence against women politicians (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2022) or employ soft repression tactics (Faree 2005; Mansbridge and Shames 2008). Soft repression involves the use of cultural mechanisms to repress or exclude collective identities, such as women politicians, or ideas that challenge dominant groups in society, such as gender parity in politics (Faree 2005; Mansbridge and Shames 2008).

### *Backlash and Moral Panic*

One of the soft repression tactics that elites utilize when faced with a "crisis of hegemony" that challenges the legitimacy of the dominant ideology in society is moral panic (Hall et al. 2013). Moral panic happens when a social condition or a group of people is portrayed as a threat to societal values and interests by the political discourse and the media, while "moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people" (Cohen 2011, 1).

In other words, elites respond to perceived threats against their power and hegemony by creating a moral panic against the challenging groups using their definitional power and influence over media that allows them to control the debate around controversial issues (Hall et al. 2013).

Using moral rhetoric, the elites portray the challenging groups as deviants who have violated the official morality of the society and are therefore detrimental to conservative values, norms, and social order (Becker 1967; Cohen 1991). Moral panic is not necessarily a genuine panic, and one of its features is the small or negligible likelihood of social harm compared to the response of the dominant groups. The moral panic serves to orchestrate public opinion by creating negative emotions of fear and anger, and even inciting violence. It therefore justifies the disproportionate reaction of elites to a challenge that has risen due to serious structural problems that resolving them would undermine the dominant hegemony (Cohen 1991; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Hall et al. 2013; McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

During the "mugging crisis" in the early 1970s in the US, a moral panic was created by the dominant groups including the police and government that portrayed the black community as the cause of increasing social problems. This moral panic allowed the elites to suppress a crisis of legitimacy through adopting increasingly harsh and authoritarian measures (Hall et al. 2013). Similarly, in Europe, a moral panic surrounding Middle Eastern immigrants led to the normalization of racism and provided justification for implementing restrictive immigration policies (Krzyżanowski 2020).

In the context of gender quotas and women's presence in politics, dominant actors employ moral panic to depict women politicians and progressive policies as violating the official morality of society, traditional values, and institutions. These actors consist of elites such as male legislators as well as conservative civil society groups like religious fundamentalist societies that have been on the rise over the past few decades and have influence over media (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Fowler et al. 2018; Panchaud et al. 2019; Pousadela and Perera 2021). Furthermore, in African countries, the media landscape is largely controlled by the state or the political elites and serves dominant interests and ideology. In the case of Zimbabwe, for instance, the ruling party ZANU-PF controls Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and did not issue new broadcasting licenses in the country (Mano 2016; Sparks 2009).

The example of Uganda's fiercely contested Marriage and Divorce Bill — aimed at regulating marriage, separation, and divorce — illustrates the strategic use of moral panic. In the highly publicized 2013 debate over the bill, an alliance comprising religious institutions, traditionalists, and proponents of the patriarchy, led by male legislators, successfully defeated the bill. These groups, such as the Uganda Joint Christian Council and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, argued that it would disrupt traditional gender roles and family values, promote sexual promiscuity, and tarnish the sanctity of marriage.[1] The women politicians sponsoring the bill were branded prostitutes seeking to "spoil the institution of marriage so that everyone would become a prostitute" (Larok 2018, 160). This rhetoric incited nation-wide opposition and protests against the bill, resulting in its defeat.

Women politicians themselves are often accused by their male rivals and in the news reports of violating gendered norms and values such as modesty and sexual propriety, disrespecting their husbands, and disregarding their families as well as their duties as wives and mothers once they enter politics. For instance, when a well-known Kenyan politician Gladys Boss Shollei got a divorce, the reports, apart from covering all the gory details of the scandal with sensationalized titles such as "politics and marriage make a highly volatile mix for women," blamed her political career as the reason for the breakdown of her marriage and questioned Shollei's leadership capability as she had failed to "nurture a family."[2] In another article that was widely circulated online, the husband of a woman politician lamented allowing his wife to go into politics as she had become a prostitute and had illicit relationships with her male colleagues.[3]

As people seldom have direct contact with politicians, the public's perceptions about them are predominantly shaped through mediated exposure (Bligh et al. 2012; Chong and Druckman 2007; Reese, Gandy, and Grant 2001). The nature of this mediation, as documented by a robust scholarship, is gendered and exposes existing power dynamics in society (Aaldering and Van Der Pas 2018; Courtney et al. 2020; Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 2003; Goodyear-Grant 2009). A comprehensive meta-analysis of 90 studies on gendered political news coverage confirms the presence of gender bias. Women politicians often face heightened scrutiny of their appearance and personal lives, receive more negative assessments of their viability, and encounter a greater emphasis on gender stereotypes in relation to their traits and policy issues (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020).

This mediated exposure, influenced by dominant actors with definitional power, plays a crucial role in the construction of symbolic representation. The effect of symbolic representation resides in its capacity to evoke "emotional, affective, irrational psychological response" (Pitkin 1967, 100). A symbol is politically constructed and associated with certain representative meanings by shaping social habits and practices through manipulating the emotions and attitudes of the public (Lombardo and Meier 2014; Pitkin 1967). Consequently, this process perpetuates patterns of domination and inequality, reinforcing privileged and marginalized positions within society (Connell 2002; Dovi 2007).

From this perspective, the symbolic effect of women's representation and the social meaning that their political presence generates largely depends on the affective responses that people have been trained to experience upon exposure to women politicians who "stand for" women citizens in general (Lombardo and Meier 2014; Meier 2012; Pitkin 1967). Research indicates that the moral rhetoric of elites can strongly influence individuals' opinions and attitudes by eliciting powerful emotions (Clifford et al. 2015; Clifford and Jerit 2013; Graham and Haidt 2012; Tamborini et al. 2018).

Through the use of moral rhetoric, therefore, elites can construct or reinforce the connection between a symbol and its meaning. Consequently, by generating a moral panic against women politicians and moralizing women's presence in politics, elites establish a link between women's political representation and either the violation or the necessity of upholding conservative values. The moralization of an issue often bears negative consequences as it has the potential to elicit strong

negative emotions, provoke hostile attitudes, and lead to punitive actions (Kraaijeveld and Jamrozik 2022; Ryan 2014). In this study, I employ moral foundations theory to measure the presence of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians.

### Moral Foundations of Moral Panic

Moral foundations theory posits that people's conceptions of morality have evolved as mental systems along five sets of intuitions or foundations throughout history in response to "adaptive challenges" facing communities (Graham et al. 2013, 67). These foundations fall into five categories and each category is divided into violation (vice) and upholding (virtue) dimensions: (1) care/harm, (2) fairness/cheating, (3) loyalty/betrayal, (4) authority/subversion, and (5) sanctity/degradation. For instance, the foundation of loyalty/betrayal is developed in response to the challenge of creating cohesion within the group by suppressing individual selfishness, and authority/subversion in response to the challenge of forming and maintaining social hierarchies (Graham et al. 2013; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

The first two (individualizing) foundations emphasize individual rights, avoidance of harm, fairness, and equality. Prioritizing these foundations is associated with support for progressive policies, social justice, and equality. In this paper, I focus on the three binding foundations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity. These foundations "bind people into roles, duties, and mutual obligations" (Graham et al. 2011, 368) and serve to strengthen social groups and institutions by promoting attitudes that uphold traditional social order, values, and norms. Loyalty is associated with prioritizing and self-sacrificing for the group; authority pertains to respecting long-standing traditions and established social hierarchy as well as complying with official authority; and sanctity is related to protecting physical and spiritual purity, such as observance of traditional religious values and sexual propriety.

Research consistently indicates a strong association between prioritizing binding moral foundations with conservativism (Day et al. 2014). Conservatives are more averse to change and more concerned with preserving traditional social order and hierarchies, and therefore have a higher tolerance for inequality and discrimination (Jost et al. 2003). In making moral judgments, conservatives tend to prioritize the foundations of loyalty, respect for authority, and sanctity (Haidt and Graham 2007; van Leeuwen and Park 2009), which promote conservative values such as group cohesion and self-sacrifice and respect for authority. Endorsing binding foundations can perpetuate and justify patterns of discrimination and inequality, particularly impacting marginalized social groups like women (Hoover et al. 2021; Janoff-Bulman and Carnes 2016; Malka et al. 2016; Strupp-Levitsky et al. 2010).

Moreover, endorsing binding moral foundations is associated with sexist attitudes that maintain traditional gender roles and hierarchy (Vecina and Piñuela 2017). The authority foundation, for example, contributes to the belief that men should be leaders in society, while women should be subservient to men and focus on their traditional roles as mothers and caregivers (Lakoff 2014).

Women politicians, therefore, are perceived as violating the foundation of authority and loyalty as they prioritize the pursuit of political power over their families (Harper and Harris 2017). Unsurprisingly, higher regard for binding foundations is also correlated with more negative attitudes toward women in managerial positions (Baldner and Pierro 2019), as powerful women are perceived as subverting gender hierarchies and threatening the status quo (Brescoll, Okimoto, and Vial 2018).

Additionally, the sanctity foundation contributes to the belief that women's bodies should be controlled and protected in private spheres, and those who engage in "immoral" behaviors deserve punishment. In news coverage of women politicians, women politicians are accused of violating the sanctity foundation by consorting with their male counterparts, rendering sexual favors, and "opening their legs to men" for political gain.[4] Moreover, they are encouraged to respect the traditional gendered norms and hierarchies, be "humble" wives, and treat their husbands as the "boss" of the household.[5]

By invoking binding moral values in their rhetoric, elites activate conservative-relevant moral intuitions in individuals and shape the attitudes of people by tapping into deeply held moral beliefs and values (Clifford and Jerit 2013). Hence, moral rhetoric can serve as a powerful tool in constructing symbolic representation as it can evoke an emotional response from individuals (Brescoll, Okimoto, and Vial 2018) and reinforce the connection between symbols and their meaning. In the case of moral panic against women politicians, the conservative rhetoric connects women's presence in politics to the violation or necessity of upholding conservative values and norms in society.

In conclusion, moral foundations theory provides a useful framework for measuring conservative moral language in news articles. Analyzing the salience of binding moral foundations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity allows us to understand how often conservative values are invoked in news coverage of women politicians as compared to their male counterparts.

To recapitulate, I argue that elites perceive quota reforms and gains in women empowerment as a threat to their power and use their influence over media to engineer a moral panic against women politicians using conservative moral rhetoric to portray them as endangering social order and values. This rhetoric may discourage women from engaging in politics, undermine their legitimacy as political actors, and overall impede the descriptive, substantive, and symbolic success of quota reforms. Furthermore, moral panic may increase violence against women politicians by creating the perception that they are endangering society by violating conservative moral values. Research indicates that people support harsher punitive measures when social order and collective norms — such as group cohesion, traditional hierarchies, and adherence to moral values — are perceived to be threatened by the actions of individuals (Silver and Silver 2017). Based on these, I propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis A:* An increase in the descriptive representation of women is associated with a higher salience of conservative moral rhetoric in the news coverage of women politicians, conditional on the adoption of gender quotas.

### Backlash and Type of Quota

There are different types of quota policies — including reserved-seat, legislated candidate, and party quota models — that provide elites with varying levels of control over implementing quotas provisions (Darhour and Dahlerup 2013; Krook 2007). Reserved-seat quotas allocate a specific number of legislative seats to women by law and ensure the electoral outcome (Dahlerup 2005). Legislated candidate and party quotas target the gender composition of candidate lists, with the difference that the former is binding for all parties, whereas the latter is voluntarily adopted at the parties' discretion.

Reserved-seat models are typically adopted in a top-down manner and imposed on elites when a strong executive seeks to maintain their strategic interests and dominance, or in response to pressure from international actors rather than as a measure to address the under-representation of women (Chowdhury 2002; Darhour 2020; Krook 2006; Muriaas and Wang 2012). Party quotas, in contrast, are often presented as political parties' commitment to promoting gender equality. However, scholars argue that the decision to adopt party quotas is driven by various factors, including pressure from the electorate, a desire to improve the party's electability by attracting support from women voters (Tripp and Kang 2008), and an attempt to consolidate their power in relation to other candidates while maintaining control over the nomination process (Baldez 2004). Furthermore, evidence indicates that in single-party dominant countries such as South Africa and Namibia, the implementation of party quotas can lead to a significant increase in women's presence in the legislature similar to the reserved seat model.

Elites in countries with party quotas have the ability to utilize informal tactics, such as allocating women to unwinnable positions, manipulating election outcomes, and maintaining existing power dynamics, even with the presence of quotas (Verge and Troupel 2011). In contrast, elites in countries with reserved-seat models do not have access to such strategies. As a result, I argue that elites in reserved-seat model countries are more likely to perceive quota reforms as a threat to their privileges. To counter this perceived threat, they may employ soft repression tactics, such as generating moral panic, to mobilize the public against women's political participation. Based on this analysis, I propose the second hypothesis:

***Hypothesis B:*** An increase in the number of women in parliaments with a reserved-seat model is more likely to be associated with a higher proportion of conservative moral foundations in news coverage of women politicians.

### Data and Method

Investigating the two hypotheses of the study (A and B) requires capturing conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians, which I measure by applying automated content analysis of moral foundations in news articles. In the following sections, I explain the sample selection for the study and summarize the process of collecting news articles and measuring conservative

moral language in them. Then I explain the dependent and independent variables as well as the method of analysis.

### Sample Selection

In this study, I focus on 10 selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya. These countries were selected based on several key considerations, including the variation in the percentage of women's representation, the diversity in the adoption and types of quota policies, and the availability of data. Some of the countries in the sample have witnessed an increase in women's descriptive representation attributed primarily to the implementation of gender quotas (Barnes and Burchard 2013; Bush and Zetterberg 2020; Edgell 2017; Hughes and Tripp 2015).

The selected sample offers a wide range of variation in terms of women's descriptive representation. For example, at the beginning of the study, women occupied approximately 4% or less of the seats in both Nigeria and Kenya. While the percentage has remained relatively unchanged in Nigeria, it significantly increased to more than 21% in Kenya after the implementation of the reserved-seat quota in 2013. These countries also exhibit diversity in the adoption and implementation of quota systems. Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia have not adopted quotas, whereas Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Namibia implemented the policy during the study period (Clayton 2014). South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda had quotas in place before 2000. Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have implemented the reserved-seats model, whereas South Africa and Namibia adopted voluntary party quotas. This variation provides an ideal environment for investigating the potential backlash effect against women politicians following the implementation of gender quotas.

To gather newspaper articles for content analysis, I utilized the Nexis Data Lab service, a cloud-based platform that offers access to news articles from around the world. However, it is important to note that the availability of articles for non-English-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa was limited within the archive, and the coverage in these counties spanned a short period of time. Given this consideration, a careful assessment of data availability led to the selection of 10 countries in the region to ensure variation in terms of the percentage of women's representation and the presence/type of quota policies.

Although the selection of these 10 countries provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations in case selection. The lack of data for non-English-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa may limit the generalizability of findings. Nevertheless, the selected countries offer a meaningful context for investigating the potential backlash effect against women politicians following the implementation of gender quotas. Future research can expand the case selection to include a broader range of countries and incorporate additional sources of data to further enhance our understanding of this phenomenon.

### News Collection Process

To obtain news articles about politicians in sample countries, I first collected the names of more than 20,000 aspiring former and current members of parliaments in these countries through official outlets including parliament websites and election results published by governments. Then I identified their gender by consulting various sources, including governmental gazettes, news articles, and social media platforms. This dataset was then used to collect around 500,000 articles published between 2000 and 2020 in the sample countries from Nexis Data Lab service, a recently launched cloud-based platform that provides access to news around the globe. The selection criterion is that politicians should be discussed in the headline or the lead, which ensures they are the main focus of the article (O'Keeffe and McCarthy 2010). Using the data on the gender of politicians, I dropped articles where names from both genders were included in the lead.

As the number of articles for men far exceeds those on women, I randomly selected an equal number of stories about men to match the size of the sample for women to create a balanced corpus and ensure that results are not driven by sample size (Hopp et al. 2020). After removing duplicate titles and articles published by non-domestic news outlets, the final corpus included more than 150,000 articles in which the sample size for each gender is roughly the same across the corpus (a total of approximately 75,000 for men and women each) within each country. Supplementary Figure 1 in SI showcases the distribution of articles in sample countries.

### Measuring Moral Rhetoric in Text

For measuring conservative moral language in news articles, I utilize the Extended Moral Foundation Dictionary (eMFD) developed by Hopp et al. (2020), which builds on the original and relatively small Moral Foundations Dictionary (MFD) (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). The eMFD offers an open-source Python package (eMFDscore) for analyzing text.[6] The developers of eMFD constructed their dictionary by leveraging an extensively validated, crowd-sourced annotation procedure. Moreover, the eMFDscore is trained on a corpus exclusively build from newspaper articles, and it has been utilized in several recent empirical analyses (Hopp et al. 2020; Malik et al. 2021). These advantages are important for the task of extracting moral rhetoric from news and make eMFD a well-suited method for this study.

The eMFD takes into consideration the context in which the word appears and detects latent, morally relevant information in the text, whereby words are assigned a probability of belonging to a foundation. For example, the word *kill* might belong to the foundation of care/harm with a probability of 80% and the foundation of loyalty with a probability of 30%. The open-source text analysis tool developed for scoring the documents — eMFDscore — allows the researcher to score the document using only the foundation with the highest probability (single vice-virtue method), therefore avoiding correlation among various foundations. Here, I use "bow emfd single vice-virtue" to extract moral language from the text corpus. Supplementary Table 1 in SI provides an example of the package's output.

### Dependent and Independent Variables

*Dependent variable* — The dependent variable is a [0, 1]-bounded conservative moral rhetoric score that measures the salience of binding moral foundations invoked in articles. Higher values of the dependent variable indicate higher salience of conservative moral rhetoric. Previous studies have measured moral rhetoric in terms of separate foundations (e.g., purity/degradation, care/harm). Recent research, however, suggests foundations cluster together, and invoking one of them triggers other intuitions as well. These studies, therefore, use aggregate moral foundation scores (Malik et al. 2021). Following this approach, after obtaining the scores for each binding foundation separately, I aggregate them to create the conservative moral rhetoric score to better capture the overall proportion of moral rhetoric in text. Figure 1 shows the annual trend of the conservative moral rhetoric score in news coverage of women politicians for each country in the sample over the duration of the study.

*Independent variables* — Main independent variables include the percentage of women's descriptive representation, quota adoption, type of quota system, and the gender of the politician discussed in the article.

Data on the proportion of seats held by women in single or lower chambers of national parliaments is obtained through the Inter-Parliamentary Union archives.[7] Figure B in SI demonstrates the changes in the proportion of women in parliaments across countries in the sample. The gender of the politician is a binary variable that indicates whether the lawmaker discussed in the article is male or female.

The binary variable of quota adoption indicates whether and when a country has adopted the policy, the data on which is collected from the International IDEA.[8] The type of quota is a categorical variable with three levels of no quota, reserved seat, and party quota, which is also created using data from the International IDEA. As the other main independent variable is the percentage of women's representation in single or lower chambers of parliament, quota type is determined based on the affirmative action implemented in the lower chamber in case of bicameral countries.

### Empirical Strategy

In this study, I analyze cross-national, longitudinal, and hierarchical data from domestic newspapers in the sample countries using a random-effects model. I also estimate fixed-effects models and present the results — that are consistent with random-effects models — in the SI. Clustering of observations in longitudinal data introduces two types of variances for variables: within- and between-country that correspond to two different relationships in response to a variable (i.e., percentage of women in single or lower chambers of parliaments). Random-effects estimation combines both types of variation for estimating the effect of the explanatory variable on the outcome. It accounts for the dependence of observations in the same group — articles published within the same country — and therefore leads to unbiased estimates of standard errors.

Scholars have recently begun to use a hybrid method that disentangles within- and between-unit variation errors (Barr et al. 2013; Bell and Jones
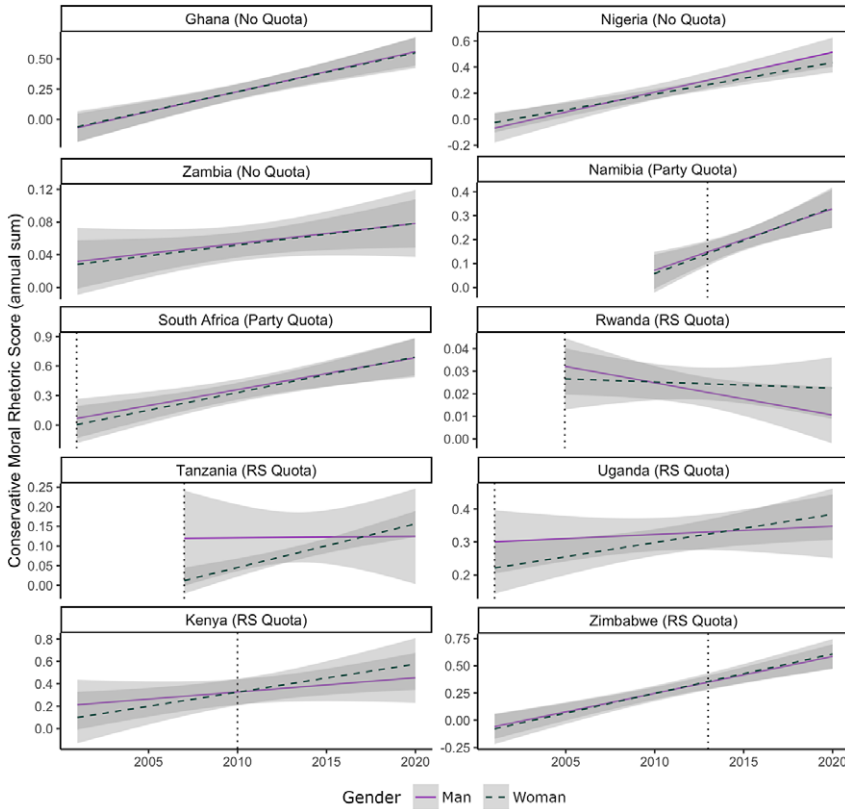
**Figure 1.** Trends in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of politicians, 2001–2021. The dashed lines indicate year of quota adoption. As can be seen in countries with reserved-seat quotas — Kenya or Uganda for instance — there is a surge in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric compared to men and relative to the pre-quota period. It is noteworthy that in the case of South Africa, although quotas were in place prior to 2000, the country's ruling party — the African National Congress — adopted a 50% gender quota in national elections 2009 when we observe an upward trend in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in the news of women politicians. In countries without quota, however, the salience slightly varies or decreases for women across the years. *Note*: The annual values of the conservative moral rhetoric score are created by summing up and normalizing the scores of individual binding foundations for all news articles published by domestic news outlets in one year in each country.

2015; Certo, Withers, and Semadeni 2017; Malik et al. 2021). In this method, the between variable is calculated by obtaining the cluster mean of the explanatory variable $\overline{x}_i$ and within variable by obtaining the group-centered variation $(x_{ij} - \overline{x}_i)$ as shown in Equation (1):

$$y_{ij} = \beta_1 \overline{x}_i + \beta_2 (x_{ij} - \overline{x}_i) + u_i + e_{ij} \qquad (1)$$

where within-country variation — $\beta_2$ — cannot be correlated with country-level effects $u_i$, as $u_i$ does not vary within countries. By disentangling the variation in the data, the coefficients capture the within-country effect, specifically how changes in women's descriptive representation within a country correlate with the salience of conservative moral language in interaction with quota adoption or the type of quota system.

I run two multilevel models for testing my proposed hypotheses, as shown in Equations (2) and (3). In Equation 2, the dependent variable is conservative moral rhetoric index that measures the salience of moral language in observation (article) $i$ within the publication $j$ in country $k$ at occasion (month) $t$. Woman.Representation(demean)$_{kt}$ indicates the within-country variation in the percentage of women's parliamentary presence in country $k$ at occasion $t$, whereas Quota.Adoption$_{kt}$ indicates whether country $k$ has implemented quota policy at occasion $t$, and Gender$_i$ refers to the gender of politicians discussed in the article. Woman.Representation(mean)$_k$ measures the time-invariant mean of women's parliamentary presence in country. In Equation 3, Quota.Type$_{kt}$ is the type of quota implemented in country $k$ at occasion $t$. $u_k$, $u_j$, and $u_t$ are random effects for country, publication, and occasion (month), respectively.

$$Conservative.Rhetoric.Score_{\{ijkt\}}$$
$$= \beta_1 Woman.Representation(demeaned)_{\{tk\}} + \beta_2 Quota.Adoption_{\{tk\}}$$
$$+ \beta_3 Gender_i + \beta_4 Woman.Representation(mean)_k$$
$$+ \beta_5 Woman.Representation(demeaned) \times Quota.Adoption \times Gender$$
$$+ u_k + u_j + u_t + e_{\{ijkt\}}$$

$$(2)$$

$$Conservative.Rhetoric.Score_{\{ijkt\}}$$
$$= \beta_1 Woman.Representation(demeaned)_{\{tk\}} + \beta_2 Quota.Type_{\{tk\}}$$
$$+ \beta\_3 Gender\_i + \beta\_4 Woman.Representation(mean)_k$$
$$+ \beta\_5 Woman.Representation(demeaned) \times Quota.Type \times Gender$$
$$+ u_k + u_j + u_t + e_{\{ijkt\}}$$

$$(3)$$

The main term of interest in both models is the three-way interaction, which indicates the effect of the increase in the percentage of women in the legislature on the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women compared to men, conditional on the adoption or the type of gender quotas. Analyzing articles for both men and women serves to capture the overall salience of conservative moral rhetoric in the news coverage of politicians in the country. There is no reason to assume that the proportion of moral rhetoric in the news about men is meaningfully associated with the percentage of women's parliamentary presence. Therefore, the result of interaction would reveal whether changes in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric for women are the result

of overall trends in the endorsement of moral foundations in the countries under study or associated with women's presence in politics.

## Results

I examine two hypotheses in this study to explore the backlash effect against women politicians following the implementation of gender quotas. Hypothesis A predicts that an increase in the proportion of seats held by women in the single or lower chambers of national parliaments is positively associated with a higher salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians, conditional on the adoption of a quota system. In reporting results, I focus on the within-country variation in women's representation in parliaments as it reflects changes within the country and is hereby referred to in the analysis as *%Woman Representation.* The compelete tables with mean value of women's representation are presented in the SI.

Table 1 and Figure 2 present the results of the within-between random effects model that tests this expectation. The coefficient for *%Woman Representation* indicates changes in the proportion of conservative moral rhetoric in news the coverage of men in countries with no quota system. The coefficient is statistically indistinguishable from zero ($\beta = -0.002, t = -0.7$), suggesting that in countries with no gender quota, the proportion of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of men does not vary in relation with changes in women's representation (see left panel of Figure 2).

Meanwhile, the coefficient for the interaction between *%Woman Representation* and binary variable of *Gender (woman)* is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.028, t = -8.4$). It suggests that in the absence of a quota system, a higher presence of women in the legislature is associated with a lower proportion of conservative moral language, as can be seen in the left panel of Figure 2. This result could be indicative of the positive attitudinal effect of descriptive representation as theorized by the literature, whereby a more prominent presence of women in the positions of power improves gender role attitudes and beliefs about their leadership capabilities (Allen and Cutts 2018; Beaman et al. 2009). However, the coefficient for *Gender (woman)* and *Quota Adoption* is positive and significant, suggesting that the implementation of gender quota is associated with increase in conservative moral rhetoric in the news about women even when there is no change in women's descriptive representation within the country (*%Woman Representation* = 0).

The primary term of interest in the model is the three-way interaction between the three independent variables. The interaction captures the changes in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians, in response to variation in women's parliamentary presence, conditional on the adaptation of gender quota. The coefficient for the interaction term is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.044, t = 11.7$), which, as can be seen in the right panel of Figure 2, shows that in countries with gender quota, the increase in the descriptive representation of women is associated with a higher proportion of conservative moral language in news on women politicians. Furthermore, the

**Table 1.** Within-between random effects model for the effect of quota adoption on conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians

|  | Dependent variable: |
|---|---|
|  | Conservative moral rhetoric score |
| % Women representation | −0.002 |
|  | (0.003) |
| Gender|woman] | −0.002*** |
|  | (0.0001) |
| Quota adoption | 0.002*** |
|  | (0.0003) |
| % Women representation:Gender|woman] | −0.028*** |
|  | (0.003) |
| % Women representation: Quota Adoption | −0.003 |
|  | (0.004) |
| Gender|woman]:Quota adoption | 0.0003* |
|  | (0.0002) |
| % Women representation:Gender:Quota | 0.044*** |
|  | (0.004) |
| Constant | 0.072*** |
|  | (0.001) |
| Country | 10 |
| Country:Publication | 99 |
| Country:Month | 252 |
| Observations | 1,50,231 |
| Log likelihood | 4,32,337.60 |
| Akaike inf. crit. | −8,64,649.20 |
| Bayesian inf. crit. | −8,61,520.30 |

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

positive association is not due to an overall increase in the conservative moral rhetoric in the news, as its salience is decreasing in the news of male politicians (right panel of Figure 2).

The results confirm my expectation. The salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians increases following the implementation of gender quotas, which suggests dominant actors leverage their definitional power to generate a moral panic around women's political
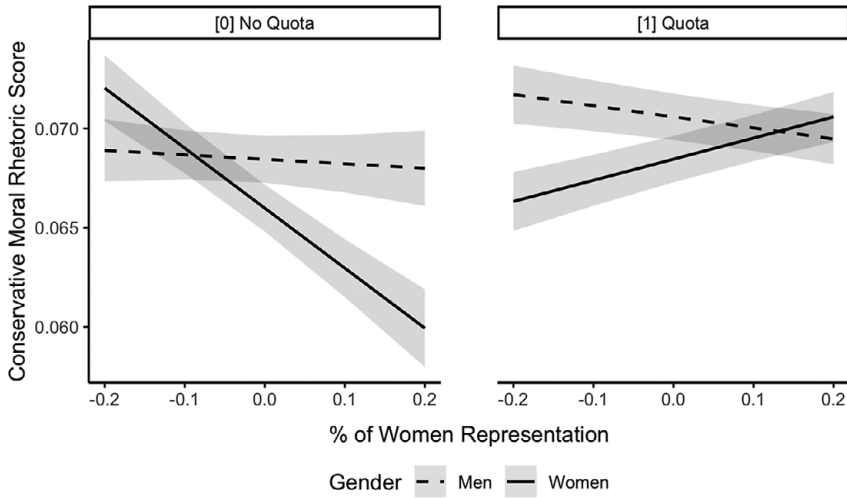
**Figure 2.** In countries that have adopted gender quota, increase in the percentage of women in parliaments is followed by significant increase in the salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians.

participation and enforce long-established social order and values. This tactic serves to motivate public opposition to women's political pariticpation and help these elites to justify and/or normalize their resistance to progressitve quota reforms (Goode 2014; Krook 2016).

While the first hypothesis explores the conservative backlash against women following their increased participation after the implementation of gender quotas, hypothesis B disentangles the trends in countries with different types of quota systems. Hypothesis B predicts that the type of quota influences the backlash against women politicians. I expect an increase in the proportion of seats held by women in legislatures of countries with a reserved-seat system to be associated with a higher endorsement of conservative moral language compared to countries with a party quota system.

To test this hypothesis, I focus on countries that have already implemented quotas and run a model with the type of quota policy as one of the independent variables. The dependent variable is the conservative moral rhetoric score, and the main term of interest is once again the three-way interaction between the main independent variables. I include gender in this model as well. Although the results of the previous model revealed an overall decrease in the salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of men in countries with a quota system, the trend might differ across countries with different quota types. Changes in moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians should be interpreted in the context of the overall endorsement of moral foundations by the media in news coverage of both men and women.

Table 2 and Figure 3 showcase the results of the random-effects model for Hypothesis B. In this model, the reference group is party quota type and male

**Table 2.** Within-between random effects model for relationship between quota type and conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians

|  | Dependent variable: Conservative moral rhetoric score |
|---|---|
| % Women representation | −0.013*** |
|  | (0.003) |
| Gender|woman] | −0.002*** |
|  | (0.0002) |
| Quota type|reserved seats] | 0.001 |
|  | (0.002) |
| % Women representation:Gender|woman] | 0.008** |
|  | (0.003) |
| % Women representation:Quota typeRS] | 0.006 |
|  | (0.004) |
| Gender|woman):Quota type|RS] | 0.00003 |
|  | (0.0003) |
| % Women representation:Gender:Quota type[RS] | 0.012*** |
|  | (0.004) |
| Constant | 0.072*** |
|  | (0.002) |
|  |  |
| Country | 7 |
| Country:Publication | 70 |
| Country:Month | 252 |
| Observations | 98,996 |
| Log likelihood | 2,82,341.20 |
| Akaike inf. crit. | 564,656.300 |
| Bayesian inf. crit. | 564,532.800 |

* p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01

politicians. The coefficient for *%Woman Representation* is statistically significant and negative ($\beta = -0.013, t = -4.05$), which suggests a decrease in the endorsement of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of male politicians in countries with a party quota model over the duration under study. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction between *%Woman Representation* and *Gender[woman]* ($\beta = 0.008, t = 2.2$) indicates that increase in the proportion of women in legislature in countries with party quota system
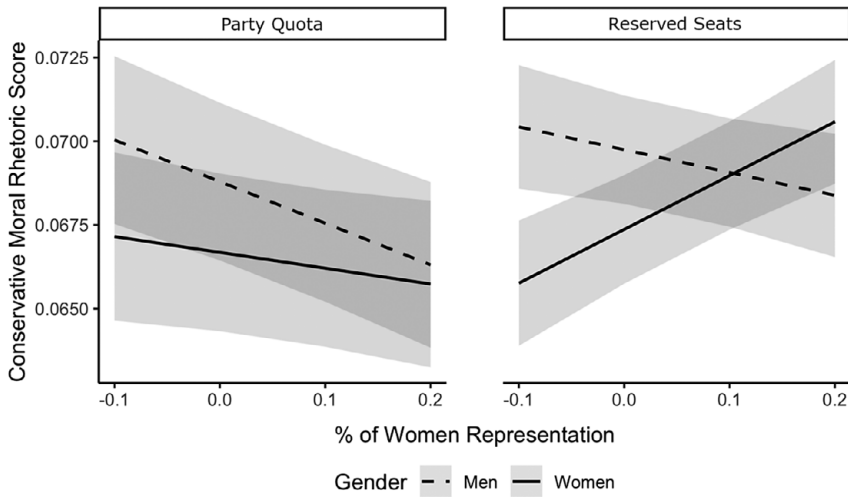
**Figure 3.** The influence of quota type on the salience of conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians. Media reporting of women politicians in countries with reserved seat quotas has a higher proportion of conservative moral rhetoric.

is correlated with an increase in salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women compared to their male counterparts.

The main term of interest, the coefficient of the three-way interaction, captures the changes in the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women in response to the independent variables conditional on the type of quota system and given the overall salience of conservative moral rhetoric in the media. The interaction term is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.012, t = 2.9$), which confirms my expectation. The coefficient indicates that an increase in the percentage of women in the legislature of countries with a reserved-seat model is associated with a higher salience of conservative moral foundations in news coverage of women politicians compared to countries with party quotas, given the overall salience of conservative moral language in news in these countries. Although, as can be seen in the left panel of Figure 3, the proportion of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women is still increasing compared to that of their male counterparts in countries with a party quota model.

These results are consistent with the evidence on the implications of quota types, that suggests in countries with reserved-seat quota models, women politicians are more likely to experience tokenism, as well as less political legitimacy and efficacy, and be sidelined (Darhour 2020). Reserved-seat quotas are likely to be adopted as a strategy by the government to improve the country's international reputation and signal commitment to democratic values and norms. However, these top-down policies are arguably more aimed at maintaining the dominant groups' hold on power than empowering women. Furthermore, as elites have less control over the electoral outcome, they are more likely to use soft repression tactics such as moral panic to subordinate women within politics and limit the transformative potential of quota reforms.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Some scholars argue that quota reforms and subsequent gains in women's empowerment in politics are often faced with resistance from elites, in reaction to a sense of decline in power and threat to their privileges, which creates a backlash against women politicians. These actors utilize soft repression tactics to counter or undermine the transformative effects of quota reforms and limit women's political efficacy. While opposition to quota implementation and structural factors affecting their impact has been extensively explored, elites' resistance after affirmative action goes into effect remains understudied. In this study, I investigated one of the soft repression tactics that dominant actors employ to maintain the status quo and protect their power following the implementation of gender quotas.

I argued that elites create a moral panic around women's intrusion into politics using conservative moral language as a soft repression tactic. The moral panic serves to incite people's opposition to women's political participation and justifies the elites' resistance against the transformative effects of gender quotas. I offered two hypotheses: First, quota-induced increases in women's representation would be followed by a wave of moral panic that I measured using the salience of conservative moral rhetoric in news coverage of women politicians. Second, elites in countries with a reserved-seat model are more likely to leverage moral panic to push back against quota reforms as they have less control over electoral outcomes compared to countries with party quota models.

I investigated these expectations using automatic content analysis and a cross-national and longitudinal design. The findings of empirical analyses confirm my hypotheses, showing that gains in women's representation after quotas are followed by significant increases in the conservative moral language in news coverage of women politicians. The moral panic may dissuade women from entering politics or limit their presence to gender-appropriate political roles and activities. It can also potentially affect women's legislative effectiveness and undermine public opinion about women's political capability. However, examining the association between conservative moral language in news and support for women's political participation as well as their willingness to enter politics is outside of the scope of this paper, and should be addressed in future studies. Another venue of investigation is exploring the impact of conservative moral language in news on individuals' gender role attitudes and biases.

Identifying soft repression in the form of moral panic as a mechanism of backlash holds significant implications for advocates of gender equality in politics and for ensuring the electoral outcomes of gender quotas. Countering the negative impacts of moral panic around women's political participation requires employing different persuasive strategies as moral-based attitudes are more resistant to change.

## Notes

**1.** https://tinyurl.com/c92mmv93; https://tinyurl.com/5xfben37; https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/voters-reject-marriage-and-divorce-bill-1538912.

**2.** https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/saturday-magazine/politics-and-marriage-make-a-highly-volatile-mix-for-women-244170

**3.** https://thisisnews.ng/infidelity-i-regret-allowing-my-wife-to-go-into-politics-man-laments-in-court/

**4.** https://tribuneonlineng.com/lack-of-integrity-can-mar-a-womans-political-ambition-hon-esan/

**5.** https://thenationonlineng.net/to-succeed-african-women-must-work-hard-kalebong/

**6.** https://github.com/medianeuroscience/emfdscore

**7.** http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif-arc.htm

**8.** https://www.idea.int

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