

# Gender Balance on State Boards in Ireland: To the Forefront of Progress or Concealing the Status Quo?

Elaine Berkery ,<sup>1\*</sup> Caroline Murphy,<sup>1</sup> and Christine Cross<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we examine female appointments to government-owned corporations, called State Sponsored Boards (SSBs), in Ireland over a twenty-eight-year period, to analyze the extent to which gender parity has been achieved using voluntary gender targets. Using data from thirty-four SSBs, we found that overall figures relating to the achievement of gender parity on SSBs are masking the reality of female representation on these boards. We have demonstrated that the high concentration of females on particular boards is increasing the overall average gender representation figures, and as a result, a high proportion of boards are not meeting their gender targets. This research provides evidence of the importance of taking a more nuanced approach to examining gender diversity on boards as a whole.

## Introduction

The inclusion of a goal for gender equality and the empowerment of women in the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrates a global commitment to gender equality. SDG5, adopted by members of the UN, mandates for gender equality on boards (Chittoor, Bang, and Kavil 2021). Furthermore, the European Union's involvement in promoting equal rights and opportunities at both the national and transnational level is reflected in the progressive development of women's rights across Europe. Since the 1990s, EU policy has made a concerted effort to enshrine gender equality in its governance activities and to transform mainstream policies by adopting gender mainstreaming as political strategy, which also implies effects for its member states

<sup>1</sup>Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, Limerick, V94 T9PX, Ireland

<sup>2</sup>Edinburgh Napier Business School, Edinburgh, EH11 4BN, Scotland, UK

\*Elaine.Berkery@ul.ie

(Stratigaki 2005). In some countries there is a legislative requirement to deliver equal treatment to men and women through promoting gender equality (Rees 2005), for example, gender quotas in Belgium, while in other countries a softer approach is taken, for example, gender targets in Ireland, which is the context for this article. Szydło (2015) has pointed to concerns around the use of legislative requirements for gender-balanced boards in the European Union, advocating instead for the use of voluntary measures rather than compulsory gender quotas. In this article we focus on the effectiveness of a voluntary target-led approach adapted by the Irish government to the appointment of female board members onto State-Sponsored Boards (SSBs) in Ireland between 1992 and 2019 inclusive, to redress the significant underrepresentation of women in this area. First, to determine the full effectiveness of these gender targets, we analyze data from thirty-four randomly selected SSBs since the introduction of gender targets in 1992. In our analysis, we draw on data from five boards across each of the six SSB categories (Commercial, Promotional/Developmental, Health, Cultural, Regulatory, and Advisory) which provides a representative snapshot of the overall trends in female appointments onto SSBs during the period 1992–2019. We also track the appointment of female chairpersons during this period on these boards. In the second stage of our analysis, we examine the trends in applications for vacancies on SSBs and the appointment of personnel to vacant positions by gender since the introduction of the revised model for ministerial appointments onto SSBs between 2015 and 2020. Overall, there are three overarching goals of this article: (i) to determine whether voluntary gender targets set out by the Irish government helped achieve gender parity on SSBs in Ireland between 1992 and 2019, (ii) to highlight the importance of creating a narrative around the actual numbers across all boards when looking at gender distribution on boards, and (iii) to outline lessons learnt from the Irish context so that other countries and indeed organizations can learn from this case. Our aim is to contribute to the ongoing conversation around the effectiveness of voluntary targets for boards by asking the overarching question: “Do voluntary gender targets really work across all sectors?” We begin by explaining what gender quotas are and how they operate.

## Gender Quotas

While much debate has ensued over the policies, practices, and initiatives that are most likely to achieve the goal of gender parity on boards and in politics, in both political discussions and academic research, two distinct pathways to equality are presented in the literature: the radical approach (quotas) and the liberal approach (concerned with improving procedures) (Klettner et al. 2016). While the radical approach, that is, increasing female representation through the use of quotas, focuses on the outcomes (Mensi-Klarbach and Seierstad 2020), the liberal approach is concerned with improving processes

and procedures around the selection of females onto boards, such as bureaucratic impartiality (Jewson and Mason 1986), the former is the focus of our analysis. Gender quotas are described as one of the most important socio-political developments of the past thirty years (Hughes, Paxton, and Krook 2017), and most often occur in the form of electoral or corporate board quotas (Dahlerup 2006; Piscopo 2015). The more recent diffusion of gender quotas to corporate boards (Dahlerup 2006; Hughes, Paxton, and Krook 2017; Piscopo and Clark Muntean 2018) applies to the appointment of boards of directors to state-owned enterprises, publicly traded companies, and/or all companies above a certain number of employees or annual revenue threshold (Hughes, Paxton, and Krook 2017; Terjesen, Aguilera, and Lorenz 2015). Over the past two decades, research on gender quotas, particularly corporate quotas, has flourished across disciplines including sociology, political science, public policy, business, law, economics, international studies, and women and gender studies, yet the study of corporate quotas remains in its infancy (Hughes, Paxton, and Krook 2017). Corporate quotas can be further broken down into legally binding quotas versus softer approaches such as voluntary quotas or targets (Mensi-Klarbach and Seierstad 2020). In this regard, governance literature defines hard and soft quotas as two poles on a continuum of enforceability, where hard law is “the one that is enforced by the state as opposed to voluntary codes” (Aguilera and Jackson 2010, 511).

Piscopo and Clark Muntean (2018) highlight that corporate quotas “matter” because they symbolize a country’s willingness to address women’s underrepresentation in business via legislation. In line with this, Teigen, Lépinard, and Marin (2018, 342) assert that quotas in different sectors reflect a governance model that employs gender parity to “counteract challenges to legitimacy and democratic deficit within decision-making assemblies.” Advocates of quotas tend to emphasize that women, as equal citizens to men, are equally qualified to serve, and quotas are therefore a necessary and effective solution to their underrepresentation in public office (Cowell-Meyers and Younissess 2021). Since the introduction of legally binding corporate board quotas in Norway in 2003, they have been enacted in Spain, Finland, Iceland, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Quebec, Israel, and Kenya (Ahrens and Scheele 2022; Terjesen, Aguilera, and Lorenz 2015). On the other hand, nonlegally binding quotas, often referred to as “soft quotas,” introduced in countries such as Australia, Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malaysia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Terjesen, Aguilera, and Lorenz 2015), are not legally binding and a “firm that lacks a gender-balanced board can continue to operate, and only faces recommendations, warnings, and reports on the causes of noncompliance, or receive tax rebates and/or public subsidies for compliance” (de Cabo et al. 2019, 611–12). Of the forty-four European states, nineteen states use legislated gender quotas for candidate lists, with a further eighteen states mandating that women comprise a given percentage of

corporate boards. In instances where the percentage of female representation is not met, there is a requirement to explain the steps that are being undertaken to meet that threshold percentage (Cowell-Meyers and Younis 2021).

While legislation undoubtedly paves the way for increased female participation at senior levels in countries where such legislation is absent, mechanisms such as voluntary targets or a revision to corporate governance codes, requiring a “comply or explain” rule regarding female board members, have been successful (Davies 2013). In the United Kingdom, for example, the percentage of women on boards increased from 27.7 percent in October 2017 to 39.1 percent on FTSE 100 boards in 2021, meaning it exceeded the target set by the Hampton-Alexander Review of 33 percent by the end of 2020. Soft quotas may increase the number of female directors in the short term because the focus on the lack of female directors creates a statutory threat, forcing companies to act and voluntarily include more women in positions of power in order to demonstrate progress and undercut government efforts to adopt more binding solutions (Piscopo and Clark Muntean 2018). Yet, despite these positive returns, Piscopo and Clark Muntean (2018) remind us that ministers or other government representatives may urge board diversity, but encouragement is not the same as statutory or regulatory change. During the course of their investigation, Piscopo and Clark Muntean (2018) uncovered no examples of governments punishing firms for failing to meet diversity targets, due to their nonenforceable voluntary nature. However, the majority of studies looking at the adaptation of corporate quotas have paid attention to the Norwegian case, which includes regulatory measures for noncompliance (Teigen 2012), and as a result we know less about the path to the introduction of corporate quotas from a nonregulatory perspective.

*Female representation in economic decision-making and senior board roles.* Elomäki (2018) has argued that calls for gender balance in economic decision-making can be seen to challenge gendered power relations within the economy, as well as to politicize the issue through placing it on the public agenda. However, the boards where gender balance is low tend to be boards associated with strategic economic and financial decision-making, as is the case of Commercial and Promotional/Developmental SSBs. Elomäki (2018) points out that gender equality in economic decision-making took on a new impetus post the economic crisis following the increased attention paid to women’s low representation in finance and business leadership (see also Roberts 2015). In light of this, the European Commission announced actions to tackle women’s underrepresentation in economic decision-making (European Commission 2010). While progress in this area has been slow, in 2022 political agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council on the Directive on improving gender balance among nonexecutive directors of listed companies (Document 52012PC0614) proposed by the

Commission a decade before (European Commission 2022). The Directive sets a target for EU companies listed on the EU stock exchange to accelerate the reach of better gender balance. It sets a share of 40 percent of the under-represented sex among nonexecutive directors and 33 percent among all directors. These companies must ensure that board appointment procedures are clear and transparent, and that applicants are assessed objectively based on their individual merits, irrespective of gender. Of interest is the fact that it includes a section that member states must also publish information on companies that are reaching targets; the aim is that this would serve as peer pressure to complement enforcement. While Ireland backed this new EU target, time will tell if this legal approach results in a positive change for the number of women on boards in Ireland. To answer our question “Do voluntary gender targets really work across all sectors?” we turn our focus to the case of gender targets on SSBs in Ireland. Given that enough time has passed since targets were first introduced thirty years ago, it is important to determine whether the voluntary gender targets set out by the Irish government have achieved the desired outcomes.

### SSBs in Ireland

SSBs have played an important role in the Irish economy since 1927. SSBs vary enormously in their size and function, ranging from commercial, marketing, and promotional functions to social, regulatory, and cultural roles (IPA 2018). While there has been some debate as to the exact constitution and definition of SSBs (MacCarthaigh 2012), the term has been traditionally employed to describe a multitude of publicly owned organizations. The Public Service Organization Review Group took the term state-sponsored body “to cover any autonomous public body with a Board appointed by the Government to discharge those functions assigned to it by the Government” (1969, 29), distinguishing between commercial and noncommercial SSBs, noting the difference is primarily related to the source of their revenues. Some SSBs are straightforward commercial trading enterprises (commonly referred to as state-owned enterprises or commercial bodies) which differ from the general run of private enterprise companies merely in their shareholdings and control (Berkery, Tiernan, and Morley 2012). Traditionally, commercial SSBs were designed to fill gaps left by private enterprise in the industrial or financial sector, while others were designed to encourage and promote the expansion of private enterprise, by assisting private firms to find the capital for expansion, to gain footholds in foreign markets, or otherwise to develop their business (FitzGerald 1963). On the other hand, noncommercial boards function as autonomous public bodies involved in areas of promotion and development, health, culture, regulation, and the provision of advice (IPA 2018). The current categorization of SSBs as defined by the IPA is outlined in table 1.

**Table 1.** Categories of SSBs in Ireland

Commercial SSBs	Revenue generated from trading and commercial activities. Goods/services produced are sold directly to the public. Organizations in this category aspire to pay their own way and to finance their operations and fund further expansion through profits generated from their own operations.
Promotional/ developmental SSBs	These boards generally provide back-up services which contribute to economic activity. They do not produce products that are sold directly to the public, they provide services to assist industrialists, farmers, etc.
Health SSBs	SSBs in the health sector include bodies that run hospitals, as well as regulatory, advisory, and other health-related boards.
Cultural SSBs	Cultural SSBs are in business to entertain, edify, or educate the public. Some provide cultural products that are delivered directly to the public, others provide support for longer-term development.
Regulatory SSBs	Regulatory SSBs may be involved in either economic or noneconomic activities. Many of these bodies levy those they regulate and register to fund their activities. Other bodies have been set up to deal with professional regulations.
Advisory SSBs	Advisory SSBs bring interest groups and those with professional skills into the policy-making process.

Source: Adapted from [IPA \(2018, 181\)](#).

SSBs range in size from three members (for example, Commission for Communications Regulation/ComReg) through to thirty-four members (for example, National Economic and Social Council) ([stateboards.ie](#)). Ministerial appointments are made by the minister under whose department the board resides and whom the board reports to. For example, The Minister for Health makes appointments to An Bord Altranais and Dublin Dental Hospital, while the Minister for Transport makes appointments to Bus Átha Cliath and Bus Eireann. Irrespective of their size and scope, all SSBs have: (i) powers and duties set by statute or ministerial authority; (ii) are financed, partially or wholly, by grants or loans made by government ministers, or, by the issue of shares taken up by ministers; and (iii) whose governing board or council are partly/fully appointed by a minister. The governing board, which is mainly formed through ministerial appointments, controls each SSB, and in turn, is responsible and accountable to the minister and current government ([IPA](#)

2007). Under the Worker Participation Act, employee directors can be voted onto the board. To date the informal selection processes have led to a huge disparity in gender representation on SSBs over the years. The next section outlines successive government commitments to redress gender imbalance on SSBs since the early 1990s.

*Targets on SSBs.* Gender targets on SSBs were first introduced in 1992 following a recommendation put forward by the National Women's Council of Ireland to the Second Commission on the Status of Women in 1990. At the time the government committed to take steps to increase the level of female representation on SSBs to 40 percent. Despite revisiting these commitments in 2002, 2005, and 2009, changes to the selection process did not come into effect until 2011. Prior to 2011, appointments onto SSBs were at the discretion of the appointing minister, without any formal selection process. In 2011, an open process operated by the Public Appointment Service (PAS) was established, whereby expressions of interest (EOIs) were to be sought as vacancies arose on SSBs. These vacancies were to be advertised on the relevant department's website or by the independent PAS (Berkery 2017). However, and of significant importance, appointing ministers were not obliged to select from those who applied. Following on from this, a revised model for ministerial appointments to SSBs was announced in September 2014. Under the new model: all vacancies on SSBs must be advertised openly on the state boards portal (operated by the PAS); meet specific and detailed criteria determined by the relevant minister; and be processed by way of a transparent assessment system designed and implemented by the independent PAS (Howlin 2014). Since 2016, the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies governs corporate governance arrangements/practices of SSBs in Ireland. However, there are no sanctions for SSBs that do not conform to gender balance, therefore rendering these targets as voluntary. The successive government commitments to redress gender imbalance on SSBs are summarized in table 2.

*Female representation on state-sponsored bodies.* While the appointment of females onto SSBs is on an upward trajectory, progress in this area has been extremely slow. Female representation on SSBs in 1979 was a mere 9.6 percent, with 74 percent of SSBs having no female representation on their board, and 24 percent of SSBs having only one female member. The overall total of females on SSBs increased marginally to 10.45 percent in 1985 (NWCI 1998). Commenting on this rate of progress, the NWCI noted that at a rate of 2 percent every four years it would take eighty years to reach gendered balanced representation on SSBs (NWCI 1998). Between 1985 and 1995 female representation doubled from 10.45 percent to 22 percent. While the rate of increase slowed down between 1995 and 2005 the average representation of females across all SSBs increased by almost 12 percent, from 22.0 percent in 1995 to 33.6 percent in December 2005. Furthermore, during this ten-year

**Table 2.** Government commitments to address gender imbalance on SSBs 1992–2014

---

1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In accordance with a recommendation of the Second Commission on the Status of Women the Irish Government committed to take steps to increase the representation of women on state boards to 40 percent.</li> <li>• No formal policy was prepared.</li> </ul>
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During a Dáil (Irish Parliament) debate, all ministers agreed to review the gender balance composition of SSBs under the aegis of their department. Ministers to redress gender imbalances where the 40 percent target had not been reached.</li> <li>• The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform was tasked with the responsibility of monitoring the statistics and reports on progress to government annually. A funded twelve-month initiative, “The Talent Bank Project” was introduced to help identify experienced women willing to serve on state boards.</li> </ul>
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Minister for Justice wrote to all government ministers directing them to nominate both male and female candidates for appointments to SSBs where they were the responsible authority.</li> </ul>
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Code Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2009 was published; there was no reference to the issue of gender diversity as a requirement on boards.</li> <li>• In the Dáil ministers “reaffirmed” their commitment to increase female participation on SSBs, agreeing to the internationally recommended norm of 40 percent, in order to advance the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making</li> </ul>
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In March 2011 the incoming government in its “Programme for the Government of National Recovery” announced that it would also take steps to ensure that all state boards have at least 40 percent of each gender.</li> <li>• An open process operated by the PAS was established, whereby EOIs were to be sought as vacancies arose on SSBs.</li> <li>• Ministers were not “obliged” to make the selection from those who applied.</li> </ul>
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A revised model for ministerial appointments to SSBs was announced in September 2014.</li> <li>• All SSB vacancies to be advertised openly.</li> <li>• The Minister of State with responsibility for Equality, New Communities and Culture announced the development of a talent bank of available appointees as recommended by the Mid-Term Review of the National Women’s Strategy and Towards Gender Parity in Decision-Making in Ireland.</li> </ul>

---

*Continued*

Table 2. *Continued*


---

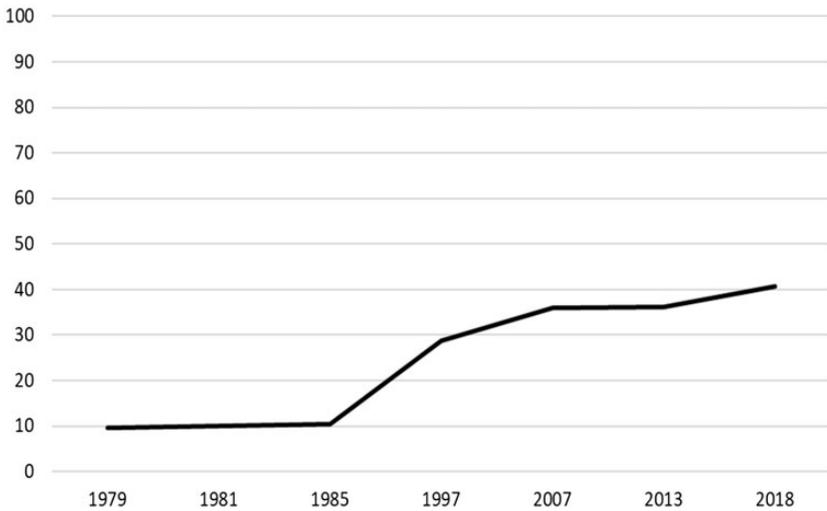
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Code of practice for the governance of SSBs was established, with specific reference to responsibility of the chairperson to actively seek to appoint candidates of the underrepresented gender from the PAS shortlist where possible.</li> </ul>
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Government published an Annex on Gender Balance, Diversity, and Inclusion to supplement the existing Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.</li> <li>● The Annex sets out measures designed to enhance diversity on state boards and addresses recommendations made by an Inter-Departmental Group on Gender Balance on State Boards.</li> </ul>

---

Sources: Adapted from [Gov.ie \(2021\)](#) [Gov.ie \(2002\)](#), [Quinlan \(2016\)](#).

period almost one-third of boards achieved 40 percent female representation ([Flanagan and Stanton 2018](#)). By December 2013, 38.7 percent of boards had achieved the 40 percent target, with females accounting for 36.2 percent of all board members ([Flanagan and Stanton 2018](#)). Female representation on SSBs finally met the coveted 40 percent target in 2018, however, only 48.9 percent of SSBs in 2018 met their 40 percent target ([Ó Fátharta and Deegan 2018](#)). More recent statistics published in this area indicate that of the 145 appointments made in 2020, seventy-nine (54 percent) went to women, ([Flanagan and Stanton 2018](#)). Taken as a whole, despite numerous government commitments since the early 1990s to promote gender balance on SSBs it has taken over two decades to achieve these targets, with evidence of female segregation on particular boards. In addition, while little data exists in this area, the current data indicate an underrepresentation of females among board chairs, with a recent report commissioned by the Department of Justice and Equality (2019) indicating that 29.8 percent of serving chairs are women, compared to 23.4 percent in 2013 ([Ferris 2018](#)). [Figure 1](#) illustrates the overall percentage of females on SSBs in Ireland between 1979 and 2018.

While the figures outlined here go some way toward providing an overview of the trajectory of female participation on SSBs in Ireland since the early 1990s, they give little insight into the dispersion of female representation across boards and categories, and more importantly, the areas in which female representation continues to be underrepresented. While on the surface, current headlines suggest that gender targets have been achieved on SSBs in Ireland, a more detailed analysis is needed to determine what is happening behind these headline statistics to determine whether they are representative of SSBs at large or masking the current reality. To provide a more nuanced view



**Figure 1.** Overall percentage of females on SSBs in Ireland, 1979–2018.

Source: Adapted from Berkery et al. (2012); Ó Fátharta and Deegan (2018).

of female representation on SSBs, we analyze female appointments onto thirty-four randomly selected SSBs since the introduction of gender targets in 1992. In doing so this article first presents data on SSBs across each of the six SSB categories (Commercial, Promotional/Developmental, Health, Cultural, Regulatory, and Advisory), and identifies overall trends in female appointments onto SSBs from 1992 to 2019 inclusive. Moreover, we aim to determine whether there is an equal distribution of females across all boards or, if indeed, high levels of female representation on particular boards are skewing the overall results. Furthermore, the roles assumed by female board members will be examined by identifying trends in the appointment of female chairpersons during this period. Finally, drawing on data from the state boards' website we analyze state board activity in terms of the numbers of applications for vacancies on SSBs and the appointments by gender since the introduction of the revised model for ministerial appointments onto SSBs in 2014. Through our analysis, conclusions will be drawn on the overall effectiveness of gender targets for SSBs in Ireland as well as the effectiveness of the latest revised model for ministerial appointments onto SSBs.

## Methods

First, using longitudinal data from SSBs in Ireland during the period 1992–2019 we analyze trends in board membership to determine the trajectory of female representation and female chairpersons on SSBs during this period. Data

were obtained through online annual reports, via the board website, directly from the board secretary, from the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) handbook and diary, or a combination of all three. In the second stage of our analysis, using data obtained from the state boards website, we analyze state board activity since the introduction of the revised guidelines for ministerial appointments to SSBs between 2015 and 2020 (note that data from 2019 are currently unavailable). Data were analyzed using SPSS 26. The average board size used in this sample was 11.6 (min = 3, max = 29, mode = 12), with the tenure of the boards varying across the sample from three to five years (vacancies were filled as positions on the boards arose).

### Profile of Boards Used in This Study

Using the categories outlined by the IPA in [table 1](#) the boards were analyzed under the six broad categories outlined by the [IPA \(2018\)](#): Commercial, Promotional/Developmental, Health, Cultural, Regulatory, and Advisory. In total, data from thirty-four randomly selected SSBs were used to create our longitudinal dataset. This includes five randomly selected SSBs from each of the six categories across each of the twenty-eight years. Totally, 79.4 percent of the boards included in the sample were in existence across the twenty-eight-year timeline of the study. In the remaining 20.6 percent of cases, the boards used in the sample were not in existence across the entire timeline of this study. To maintain a consistent number of boards across the sample, data from another board within the category were used to ensure full representation across all categories during the timeline. [Table 3](#) provides a full demographic profile of the boards including board size and proportion of female representation on each board.

### Overall Findings

*Gender profile of SSBs.* [Figure 2](#) maps the overall trends in female representation on SSBs in Ireland compared to their male counterparts between 1992 and 2019.

At first glance, the overall trends in female appointments to SSBs indicate an increase in female representation on SSBs since the introduction of gender targets. However, despite reaching the 40 percent target in 2018, it has taken twenty-five years to achieve this target, regardless of continuous renewed government commitments. The overall proportion of female representation on SSBs during this period increased from 26.3 percent in 1992 to 43.6 percent in 2019. This represents an overall average number of female board members per board of 4.6 (min = 0, max = 22, mode = 2), compared to an overall average of 8.4 for their male counterparts (min = 1, max = 17, mode = 7). Breaking this data down further, 36 percent of the total sample of boards in this study met the 40 percent gender targets set by the government, representing an overall increase from 20 percent of boards meeting their targets in 1992 to

**Table 3.** Breakdown of boards by category, board size, and percentage of female representation, 1992–2019

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2019
<b>Cultural SSBs</b>							
Average Cultural board size	10.8	11.2	11.4	11.6	10.4	10.6	10.6
Average % females on Cultural boards	37.0	37.5	31.6	37.9	34.6	<b>52.8</b>	<b>49.1</b>
<b>The Arts Council</b>							
Board size	17	17	17	13	13	13	13
% female	35.3	<b>41.2</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>46.2</b>
<b>Irish Film Board</b>							
Board size	7	6	6	7	7	7	7
% female	<b>71.4</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>42.9</b>	28.6	<b>71.4</b>	<b>71.4</b>
<b>RTE</b>							
Board size	9	8	9	9	12	10	11
% female	33.3	37.5	33.3	<b>44.4</b>	33.3	<b>60.0</b>	<b>54.5</b>
<b>The Abbey Theatre</b>							
Board size	8	9	9	11	9	11	10
% female	<b>50.0</b>	<b>44.4</b>	22.2	36.4	33.3	<b>54.6</b>	<b>50.0</b>
<b>Údarás na Gaeltachta</b>							
Board size	13	16	16	18	11	12	12
% female	15.4	25.0	12.5	22.2	18.2	33.3	33.3
<b>Commercial SSBs</b>							
Average Commercial board size	8.2	8.6	10.4	10.2	9.2	9.4	10.4
Average % female on Commercial boards	5.1	18.3	27.4	20.9	25.7	31.4	39.6
<b>Bus Eireann</b>							
Board size	6	5	8	8	10	7	9
% female	0.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	10.0	28.6	22.2
<b>Bus Atha Cliath</b>							
Board size	6	5	9	7	6	7	9
% female	0.0	20.0	11.1	0.0	<b>50.0</b>	28.6	33.3
<b>Housing Finance Agency</b>							
Board size	9	12	12	12	11	12	10
% female	11.1	25.0	<b>50.0</b>	<b>41.7</b>	36.4	<b>50.0</b>	<b>60.0</b>
<b>Iarnrod Eireann</b>							
Board size	6	6	9	9	6	7	9
% female	0.0	33.3	22.2	11.1	16.7	28.6	<b>55.6</b>
<b>An Post</b>							
Board size	14	15	14	15	13	14	15
% female	14.3	13.3	28.6	26.7	15.4	21.4	26.7

*Continued*

Table 3. *Continued*

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2019
<b>Promotional/Developmental SSBs</b>							
Average Developmental board size	9.4	10.8	10	11	9.8	9.4	10.6
Average % females on Promotional/Developmental boards	10.9	24.4	20.8	22.5	23.6	26.4	32.2
<b>Bord Iascaigh Mhara</b>							
Board size	6	6	6	6	5	6	6
% female	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	0.0	16.7	16.7
<b>Faite Ireland</b>							
Board size	9	9	8	13	13	9	13
% female	22.2	22.2	25.0	30.8	53.8	33.3	38.5
<b>IDA</b>							
Board size	12	12	12	12	12	12	11
% female	0.0	25.0	16.7	25.0	25.0	<b>41.7</b>	36.4
<b>NRA/TII</b>							
Board size	7	14	14	13	12	9	12
% female	0.0	42.9	35.7	30.8	25.0	22.2	33.3
<b>Teagasc</b>							
Board size	13	13	10	11	7	11	11
% female	15.4	15.4	10.0	9.1	14.3	18.2	36.4
<b>Health SSBs</b>							
Average Health board size	14.6	16.2	16.2	14.8	12.2	13	12.2
Average % females on Health boards	24.1	37.1	<b>45.1</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>47.0</b>
<b>Bord Altranais</b>							
Board size	29	29	29	28	23	27	23
% female	<b>51.7</b>	<b>65.5</b>	<b>72.4</b>	<b>71.4</b>	<b>43.5</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>56.5</b>
<b>Dublin Dental Hospital</b>							
Board size	14	14	14	14	14	11	12
% female	14.3	35.7	<b>42.9</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>58.3</b>
<b>National Cancer Registry</b>							
Board size	9	10	10	10	5	6	6
% female	22.2	30.0	<b>60.0</b>	<b>40.0</b>	<b>60.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>
<b>VHI</b>							
Board size	5	12	12	12	11	11	10
% female	20.0	<b>41.7</b>	25.0	25.0	36.4	27.3	20.0
<b>Health Research Board</b>							
Board size	16	16	16	10	8	10	10
% female	12.5	12.5	25.0	30.0	12.5	30.0	<b>50.0</b>

*Continued*

Table 3. *Continued*

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2019
Regulatory SSBs							
Average Regulatory board size	10.6	11.8	10.8	13	12.6	9.8	9.4
Average % females on Regulatory boards	25.8	<b>40.3</b>	32.8	<b>41.9</b>	34.6	34.5	<b>39.9</b>
The Pensions Board							
Board size	13	13	17	17	15	3	3
% female	38.5	<b>53.8</b>	<b>41.2</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>46.7</b>	33.3	33.3
Health and Safety Authority							
Board size	11	11	11	12	12	14	12
% female	9.1	27.3	36.4	<b>41.7</b>	25.0	21.4	25.0
HEA							
Board size	12	18	9	19	20	15	15
% female	25.0	38.9	33.3	47.4	45.0	46.7	53.3
EPA							
Board size	5	5	5	5	5	6	6
% female	<b>40.0</b>	<b>40.0</b>	20.0	<b>40.0</b>	20.0	16.7	33.3
Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland							
Board size	12	12	12	12	11		
% female	16.7	<b>41.7</b>	33.3	33.3	36.4		
Property Service Regulatory Board							
Board size						11	11
% female						<b>54.5</b>	<b>54.5</b>
Advisory SSBs							
Average Advisory board size	13.2	14.2	12.6	13.4	11.4	10.6	11
Average % females on Advisory boards	37.1	36.5	43.6	36.8	37.4	<b>47.6</b>	<b>43.3</b>
Combat poverty							
Board size	16	21	17	13			
% female	<b>50.0</b>	38.1	<b>52.9</b>	30.8			
IHRC/IHREC							
Board size					15	15	15
% female					<b>46.7</b>	<b>53.3</b>	<b>53.3</b>
The National Social Service Board							
Board size	12						
% female	<b>41.7</b>						
Forfas							
Board size		13	12	13	6		
% female		15.4	25.0	23.1	0.0		

*Continued*

Table 3. Continued

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2019
Irish Fiscal Advisory Board							
Board size						5	5
% female						<b>40</b>	20
Legal Aid Board							
Board size	13	13	13	13	13	12	14
% female	<b>53.8</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>53.8</b>	38.5	<b>53.8</b>	<b>58.3</b>	<b>57.1</b>
Rent Tribunal							
Board size	13	12	9	16	11	9	9
% female	23.1	33.3	<b>44.4</b>	<b>50.0</b>	36.4	<b>44.4</b>	<b>44.4</b>
National Archives Advisory Council							
Board size	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
% female	16.7	<b>41.7</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>41.7</b>

Figures in bold type indicate that the board has exceeded the gender target of 40 percent for that given year.

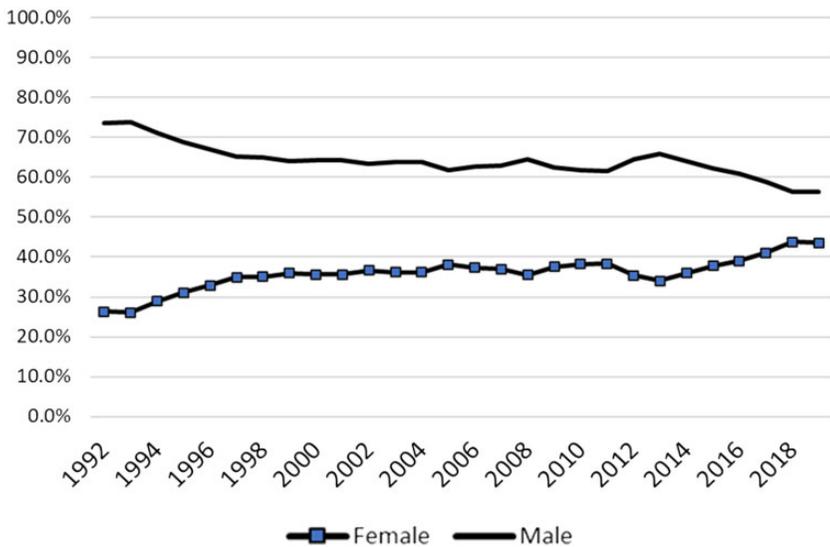


Figure 2. Gendered representation on SSBs 1992–2019.

53.3 percent of boards meeting their targets in 2019, peaking at 60 percent in 2018.

Turning to trends on individual boards, the data in figure 2 represent a range of female representation on individual boards from 0 percent to 76

percent. A chi-square test of independence was used to determine whether there was an association between individual boards and achieving gender targets. The results of which indicated a significant association between individual boards and meeting gender targets ( $\chi^2$  (33,  $N = 840$ ) = 307.53,  $P < 0.001$ ). Across the entire sample of thirty-four boards, 8.8 percent of boards have never met their gender targets, with a mere 2.9 percent of boards consistently recording greater than 40 percent female representation between 1992 and 2019. To determine the strength of association between board size and meeting gender targets we calculated an eta coefficient. The eta coefficient test statistic  $\eta^2 = 0.077$  ( $P < 0.001$ ), indicating that board size had little effect in determining whether gender targets were met.

Next, we turned our attention to the appointment of female board members across the six categories of boards outlined in [table 1](#). Boards under the remit of “Advisory SSBs” had the greatest level of female representation, whereby 63 percent of all Advisory boards across the twenty-eight-year period met the 40 percent gender targets set out by government. This is in stark contrast with boards under the remit of “Commercial SSBs” and “Development SSBs” where 13 percent and 11 percent of the total number of boards in each of these categories respectively met the gender targets. [Table 3](#) outlines the breakdown of boards by category, board size, and percentage of female representation from 1992 to 2019 inclusive.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the categories of boards and whether gender targets were met. These results indicated a significant association between board category and the meeting of gender targets ( $\chi^2$  (5,  $N = 840$ ) = 133.89,  $P < 0.001$ ). As outlined in [table 3](#), within our sample 60 percent of Advisory SSBs, 40 percent of Cultural SSBs, 20 percent of Health and Regulatory SSBs, and 0 percent of Commercial and Promotional/Developmental SSBs met their 40 percent gender targets in 1992. This contrasts with 80 percent of Cultural, Health, and Advisory SSBs, 40 percent of Commercial and Advisory SSBs, and 0 percent of Promotional/Developmental SSBs meeting their 40 percent gender targets in 2019.

The data also show that within the six individual categories certain boards are skewing the overall averages. For example, under the auspices of Health SSBs, An Board Altranais has consistently reported above-average female representation within the category (max = 72.4 percent, min 43.5 percent), while the Health Research Board consistently failed to meet their 40 percent gender target until 2018 (min = 12.5 percent, max = 50 percent). Similarly, since 1997, boards under the auspices of Cultural SSBs, The Irish Film Board, and the Arts Council, have consistently reported above-average female representation within the category, while Údarás na Gaeltachta consistently failed to meet its 40 percent gender target until 2018. At the other end of the spectrum, average female representation on Commercial SSBs has traditionally been low; however, the Housing Finance Agency has outperformed all other boards in

this category, consistently reporting above-average female representation in this category.

The next area of interest was the prevalence of female chairpersons on SSBs during the period 1992–2019. Figure 3 maps the overall trajectory of male and female chairpersons between 1992 and 2019.

The overall proportion of female chairpersons increased from 20 percent in 1992 to 36.7 percent in 2019. To determine whether there was an association between the category of boards and the appointment of female chairpersons we carried out a chi-squared test, the results of which indicated a significant association between board category and the appointment of female chairpersons ( $\chi^2(5, N = 840) = 70.82, P < 0.001$ ). From the total sample, 48.9 percent of boards that had met their gender targets had a female chairperson, compared to 68.9 percent of boards that had not met their gender targets and had a male chairperson. Disappointingly, 60 percent of Commercial SSBs, 60 percent of Promotional/Development SSBs, 20 percent of Regulatory SSBs, and 12 percent of Advisory SSBs had never had a female chairperson. Finally, there was no association between board size and the appointment of female chairpersons. However, the odds of having a female chairperson were 2.12 times higher for boards that met their gender quotas compared to boards that had not met their quotas.

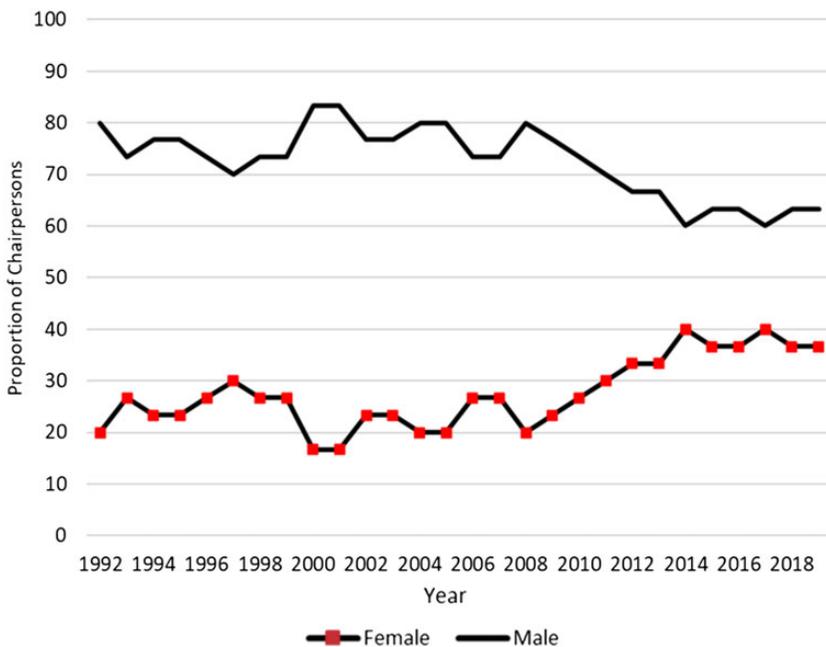


Figure 3. Gender of chairpersons 1992–2019.

The final area of interest in our analysis was state board activity between 2015 and 2020. The summary statistics provided by the state boards website allowed us to examine the numbers of EOIs received by gender, identify the numbers of suitable applicants, and analyze the appointments made by government ministers since the introduction of the newly revised appointments model.

*State board appointment activity.* During the period 2015–2020, 1,089 vacancies arose across all SSBs in Ireland, for which 14,090 EOIs were submitted. Male applications accounted for 69 percent of EOIs, while female applications accounted for 31 percent of EOIs during this period, indicating that males were twice as likely to submit an EOI when vacancies on SSBs were advertised. Of the total number of EOIs, 21.8 percent of applications were deemed suitably qualified and passed on to the relevant ministers. This equates to 19.5 percent of all male EOIs and 26.7 percent of all female EOIs being forwarded onto the relevant ministers. To determine the strength of association between gender and EOIs being forwarded onto the relevant minister we calculated an eta coefficient. The eta coefficient test statistic  $\eta^2 = 0.459$  ( $P < 0.001$ ), indicating that the gender of applicant had a large effect in determining whether the EOI submitted met the criteria for selection, and subsequently forwarded onto the relevant minister. From this we can deduct that more women who submitted an EOI met the criteria for the role advertised, compared to their male counterparts.

A total of 76.8 percent SSB vacancies were filled during the period 2015–2020, with males being appointed to 52.5 percent of board seats, compared to 47.5 percent of seats being awarded to female applicants. Of the names that were forwarded onto the relevant minister, 22.9 percent of males successfully secured a seat on an SSB, compared to 34.3 percent of females who were successful in securing a seat, meaning that women who met the initial selection criteria were 1.5 times more likely to be appointed to a board seat compared to their male counterparts. Of the total number of EOIs, 4.5 percent of male applicants were appointed to board seats compared to 9.1 percent of female applicants. In summary, males were twice as likely to submit an EOI when a vacancy was advertised compared to their female counterparts, while females who submitted an EOI were twice as likely to be appointed to a board seat compared to their male counterparts.

## Discussion

The underrepresentation of women on boards has received considerable attention in both media and academic literature worldwide (Fitzsimmons 2012), where it is widely acknowledged that females are considerably underrepresented in this area. At first glance, it would appear as though SSBs in

Ireland have turned a corner in terms of gender equality. In December 2018, SSBs in Ireland were applauded in the Irish media by running headlines such as “Average number of women on State boards exceeds 40% for the first time” (Pollack 2018). Yet, what this headline fails to capture is the fact that less than half (48.9 percent) of boards had at least 40 percent female representation, with eleven SSBs having no female representation (Ó Fátharta and Deegan 2018). To date, there has been an ongoing lack of reporting and clarity in the way in which the Irish government outlines trends in this domain. While the Irish government does acknowledge that there are boards on which females are seriously underrepresented, it does little to identify individual boards and whether this phenomenon is widespread across all types of boards, or if indeed high levels of female representation on particular boards are skewing the results. Overall, our findings indicate that while on the surface gender parity has been achieved, these figures are bolstered by boards that have consistently had a high proportion of female representatives. The reality is the gender targets set out have not been achieved, pointing to a lack of political will in addressing gender representation on SSBs in Ireland. Instead, what we have identified are pockets of homogeneity, whereby high levels of female representation in certain areas are skewing the overall results, indicating that meeting gender targets seems to be prioritized on Cultural, Health, and Advisory SSBs and to a far lesser extent on Commercial and Promotional/Developmental SSBs. These findings are in line with other international contexts. For example, in the case of Italy, different clusters of women were found to be appointed to boards, therefore restricting the overall impact of gender equality (Rigolini and Huse 2021).

Taking a more nuanced view of the data analyzed, across the individual boards and board categories, the route to gender parity on SSBs can be described as nonlinear. Taking the example of Cultural SSBs, while boards in these areas are performing well in terms of gender parity, two key trends can be identified in the data: (i) certain boards are skewing the data; and (ii) there is little evidence of a linear route to gender parity, instead, what we have identified is peaks and troughs in the data. While 80 percent of Cultural SSBs met their gender targets in 2019, Údarás na Gaeltachta has consistently failed to meet 40 percent female representation across the twenty-eight-year period of this study. On the other hand, The Irish Film Board has consistently had above average female representation with the exception of 2012. Within the area of Promotional/Developmental SSBs, there has been consistently low levels of female representation across all boards, with only very few instances of individual boards meeting their gender targets. In instances where individual boards met their gender targets, for example, the NRA in 1997 (42.9 percent) and the IDA in 2017 (41.7 percent), female representation fell in the years that followed. These one-off peaks in female representation may be explained by the formation of a new board, retirements, or people leaving prior to serving their full term. Worryingly though, Bord Iascaigh Mhara has failed to make

any progress in the area of gender parity with female representation stagnant at 16.7 percent over the twenty-eight-year period of this study, dropping to 0 percent in 2012. Overall, these findings reiterate our call to take a more nuanced approach to interpreting the data on gender parity on boards, as headline figures are often masking the reality of what is happening on the ground. In the next section, we provide a more detailed narrative on the progress made by the Irish government to redress gender imbalance on SSBs since 1992 using voluntary gender targets.

*Gender Imbalance on Irish SSBs, 1992–2019.* Despite a lapse of thirty years since the introduction of gender targets set by the Irish government to achieve gender equality on SSBs, women remain underrepresented across a number of key areas, with some 51.1 percent of SSBs in Ireland failing to achieve the 40 percent target (Ó Fátharta and Deegan 2018). Whelan and Wood (2012) explain that voluntary targets set goals for the expected percentage of women to either occupy or be nominated for leadership positions, but with minimal or no enforceable mechanisms or sanctions for failure to achieve the goal. In speaking about the effectiveness of gender targets, Sojo et al. (2016) warn that the consequence of achieving or not achieving goals can influence the level of goal commitment, highlighting that targets/quotas that are set with clear accountability and enforcement mechanisms will be more effective in increasing female representation than goals without enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, Piscopo and Clark Muntean (2018) remind us that while ministers or other government representatives may advocate for board diversity, encouragement does not equal statutory or regulatory reform. The findings from our analysis, and the slow trajectory of the numbers of women on SSBs in Ireland since 1992, indicate that successive Irish governments and government ministers have not treated the issue of gender parity on SSBs with the due diligence it deserves. Similar to Freidenvall and Ramberg (2021) we highlight the importance of political will in the implementation of gender equality policies. Recent studies have alluded to the importance of political support for introducing quotas as a way to mitigate gender equality (Terjesen, Aguilera, and Lorenz 2015). The lack of political support in Ireland in this area over the past thirty years is evident, as less than 50 percent of SSBs had achieved the gender targets set out by 2018, rendering the voluntary targets set out to be ineffective across several key areas in the Irish economy. It could be argued that up until 2014 the recruitment to SSBs was heavily influenced by access to influential personnel and networks, where there is evidence of selection and similarity bias. Political institutions appear important to women's advancement and are linked to gendered constructs (Jalalzai 2016). The historical underrepresentation of female government ministers may also have hindered the possible selection of females onto SSBs in this regard.

The most positive change to date with regard to female appointment to SSBs in Ireland is the more professional and formal approach to board selection since 2014, which has resulted in greater transparency in the overall selection process. This was evidenced in the second stage of our analysis, where trends in applications for vacancies on SSBs, along with the appointment of personnel to vacant positions by gender were examined since the introduction of the revised model for ministerial appointments in 2014. Our findings show that when vacancies for SSBs were advertised, females who submitted an EOI were twice as likely to be appointed to a board seat compared to their male counterparts. It is now time for the Irish government to change the narrative around female appointments to SSBs and show their commitment to meaningful gender equality policies that contributes to diversity in key roles. The very recent change in the EU's approach to gender quotas will no doubt create an environment where there will be more scrutiny by the public on the number of women on all boards. The significant change in the number of women on boards in the United Kingdom in the last decade provides hope that a cultural shift is possible.

*Female representation in economic decision-making and senior board roles.* Moving onto the role of chairperson on boards, the odds of having a female chairperson were 2.12 times higher for boards that met their gender quotas compared to boards that had not met their quotas. [Bozhinov, Koch, and Schank \(2019\)](#) employ the logic of the lack of fit model to argue that once women overcome the first glass ceiling and become board members, they still face a second glass ceiling preventing them from gaining senior board positions. We argue that a similar case could be made based on the Irish data, in which we also found a significant association between board category and the appointment of female chairpersons ( $\chi^2$  (5,  $N=840$ )). Between 1992 and 2019, 60 percent of Commercial SSBs, 60 percent of Promotional/Development SSBs, 20 percent of regulatory SSBs, and 12 percent of advisory SSBs never had a female chairperson. [Bozhinov, Koch, and Schank \(2019\)](#) argue that certain roles such as chair of the supervisory board have a prominent position since he or she represents the board in the public domain. Therefore, they argue that the visibility of successful women in business has probably not increased to the same degree as the participation of women on boards. Based on the findings from the Irish data, it may be likely that greater prescriptive measures beyond the numerical composition are required to progress the presence *and* prominence of women in senior economic decision-making boards. For example, such prescriptive measures might include requirements for rotation of key roles based on gender. This echoes the call made by [Bozhinov, Koch, and Schank \(2019\)](#) for the possible implementation of a voluntary or mandatory gender quotas for specific committees of the supervisory board.

*Conclusion and recommendation.* Sojo et al. (2016) note the importance of allowing time for goal setting to translate into progress. Given the thirty-year timeframe between the introduction of the first gender targets on SSBs in Ireland, whereby no sanctions have been imposed for noncompliant boards, it is now timely to consider a move toward more legally binding quotas which impose sanctions for SSBs and government departments failing to adhere to the targets being set out by government. Evidence to date suggests that in many cases, legally binding quotas have come into effect a long period after softer approaches failed to yield visible results (de Cabo et al. 2019). The issue of gender balance on SSBs has not received appropriate attention policy-wise, in line with its relevance and contribution to Irish society. More direct attention through regulation and formal policies would signal the importance of SSBs in Irish society is not being overlooked. Within any legally binding measures, attention should be paid to ensure appropriate measures are in place around the selection of candidates, particularly in instances whereby both suitably qualified males and females apply for a particular board seat. Legally binding gender quotas should be treated as a form of “Positive Action” to redress imbalances on SSBs. Positive action refers to any measure aimed at furthering the goal of equality between men and women (Selanec and Senden 2013), targeted at redressing discriminatory stereotypes and obstacles that can result in gender imbalance. Such measures, which are commonly used to ensure balanced participation of both genders on boards (Selanec and Senden 2013), relate to the preferential treatment of one gender over another, where that gender is already a minority or underrepresented (Ramos Martín 2013). Within legal frameworks, Article 4 (1) of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) allows the use of special measures aimed at contributing to equality between men and women (CEDAW n.d.), which at national level is commonly contained in equality legislation—for example, in Ireland, The Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000. While it is not expected that legally binding measures and policies directed at gender balance on SSBs will be without opposition and challenge, we argue that the lack of progress achieved through informal policies render them necessary now.

Furthermore, we recommend that measures introduced should consider the roles assumed by women on SSBs, for example, representation on sub-committees, as well as the role of chairperson. All government departments should be required to report data on the gender balance on SSBs for which they oversee on an annual basis; and individual government ministers should be held accountable for unequal gender representation on the SSBs for which they are responsible, in addition to justifying the reasons for such underrepresentation. Moreover, trade unions, staff associations, or other designated bodies, recognized for collective bargaining purposes, who have the exclusive right to nominate candidates for election as worker-directors, need to

consider and adhere to gender balance directives when proposing nominees. Coupled with this we argue there should be sanctions on government funding, whereby government departments who are not gender target compliant receive funding cuts linked to their level of noncompliance.

Additionally, individual SSBs also have an important role to play in the promotion of equitable gender representation on their boards. A number of SSBs have started to pave the way in this regard, for example, The Arts Council has the requirement for gender balance written into its legislation (Madigan 2019). Going forward this should become a requirement for all SSBs, which could be further enhanced by the development of individual diversity and inclusion policies. Overall, gender parity should not be pursued as an end goal in itself; organizations must adopt a proper working environment before they can reap the benefits of gender diversity. However, it is important to caution that, even where balanced gender representation is pursued through well-planned and well-resourced policies, problems can persist. For example, despite the level of resources put into the achievement of gender equality within Swedish state agencies, it has been noted that the outcomes have varied, both in scope and in levels of ambition (Freidenvall 2020). Cullen and Murphy (2018) argue that while powerful actors and financial elites in Ireland rhetorically engage in the business case of gender equality, this often amounts to deploying support where reputational capital can be garnered. Cullen and Murphy (2018), however, argue that those same actors will also ultimately seek to protect the status quo, rejecting the governance benefits implied in the business case of gender equality.

Humbert, Kelan, and Clayton-Hathway (2019) claim that it is important for organizations not to lose focus on “rights” at the expense of “business case” arguments for board quotas when striving for equality on corporate boards. While studies have shown that greater gender balance on boards leads to enhanced performance (European Commission 2012; Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh 2009), and other proponents argue “improvements in business leadership and decision-making, competitiveness, organizational capacity, flexibility, resilience, productivity, creativity, strategic planning, risk-taking, and ethics” (Cowell-Meyers and Younisess 2021, 10) are the effects of gender quotas, more nuanced research is needed to examine how this differs depending on the gender composition within key board roles. We suggest future research should capture the experiences of women who have held positions on SSBs in Ireland. Doing so would give a greater insight into the workings of SSBs and an insight into women’s experiences on boards. Future studies would also benefit from being able to identify the gender of the minister making the appointments, to determine whether gender of the appointing minister has an impact on overall gender representation on SSBs. It was not possible to do so, particularly in the case of data from the 1990s and early 2000s as this information was not recorded. Finally, studies should track female participation on SSBs to determine their length of tenure, relative to that of their male counterparts, as well as tracking any

remunerations received while sitting on SSBs to determine if women experience pay gaps on SSBs like other areas of employment.

To conclude, based on these findings we make the case for more legally binding quotas for SSBs in Ireland. The voluntary target approach that has been led by the Irish government since 1992 has not yielded the results to justify the continuance of this voluntary approach. The pace of change recorded is too slow; substantive changes, and by that we mean the introduction of legally binding quotas, are now required to bring all SSBs up to 40 percent gender representation and make meaningful changes in this area, which in turn will yield benefits to both society and for business. The overall trends highlighted in our analysis indicate the failure and lack of commitment on the part of the Irish government to promote and display their commitment to gender equality in Ireland, which is of concern given that government is generally viewed as setting best-practice standards in relation to gender balance. The SSBs used in our analysis include companies, agencies, and organizations in Ireland that are charged with making decisions in relation to the Irish economy, impacting both men and women in Ireland equally. We would therefore argue that given the scope of the decisions made by SSBs, the role of the decision-maker is fundamental to ensure that the decisions made are both democratic and represent the best interests of both genders. Furthermore, increasing women's access to and influence on SSBs will most likely improve organizational and social life in Ireland, paving the way for females in other roles, such as roles on private boards and senior management roles. We therefore call on government ministers to set best-practice standards, to be cognizant of the implications of their failure to appoint gender-balanced boards, and to be aware of the knock-on effect of their actions on societal perceptions of women's perceived suitability to key decision-making roles.

## References

- Aguilera, Ruth V., and Gregory Jackson. 2010. Comparative and international corporate governance. *Academy of Management Annals* 4 (1): 485–556.
- Ahrens Petra. Alexandra Scheele. 2022. Game-changers for gender equality in Germany's labour market? Corporate board quotas, pay transparency and temporary part-time work. *German Politics* 31 (1): 157–76.
- Berkery, Elaine. 2017. *Of seats, stereotypes and structures: Empirical contributions on women in the workplace from a gender-organisation-systems perspective*. Kemmy Business School, Limerick, University of Limerick.
- Berkery, Elaine, Siobhán Tiernan, and Michael Morley. 2012. Female participation trends in the Irish labour force: The case of the state-sponsored bodies in Ireland. *Administration* 60 (2): 63–85.
- Bozhinov, Viktor, Christopher Koch, and Thorsten Schank. 2019. The second glass ceiling: Women's role in supervisory boards of German firms. *Schmalenbach Business Review* 71 (3): 385–411.

- CEDAW. n.d. Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article4>.
- Chittoor, Raveendra, Nupur Pavan Bang, and Ramachandran Kavil. 2021. Regulatory mandates and gender diversity in corporate boards: The family firm effect. *Academy of Management Proceedings*. <https://journals.aom.org/doi/abs/10.5465/AMBPP.2021.14056abstract>.
- Cowell-Meyers, Kimberly, and Lori Younissess. 2021. Expanding democracy: Debating legislative and corporate board quotas in five European states. *Politics, Groups, and Identities (ahead of print)* 1–19.
- Cullen, Pauline, and Mary P. Murphy 2018. Leading the debate for the business case for gender equality, perilous for whom? *Gender, Work & Organization* 25 (2): 110–26.
- Dahlerup, Drude. 2006. *Women, quotas and politics*. London: Routledge.
- Davies. 2013. *Women on Boards (BIS, March 2012, URN 12/P135)*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182602/bis-13-p135-women-on-boards-2013.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182602/bis-13-p135-women-on-boards-2013.pdf).
- de Cabo, Ruth Mateos, Siri Terjesen, Lorenzo Escot, and Ricardo Gimeno. 2019. Do ‘soft law’ board gender quotas work? Evidence from a natural experiment. *European Management Journal* 37 (5): 611–24.
- Elomäki, Anna. 2018. Gender quotas for corporate boards: Depoliticizing gender and the economy. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 26 (1): 53–68.
- European Commission. 2010. *Strategy for equality between women and men*. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52010DC0491>.
- . 2012. *Women in economic decision-making in the EU: Progress report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- . 2022. Commission welcomes political agreement on gender balance on corporate boards, 6 July 2022. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_3478](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3478).
- Ferris, Liz. 2018. More women need to put themselves forward on state boards. <https://www.dlrchamber.ie/wiba-news/more-women-need-to-put-themselves-forward-on-state-boards>.
- FitzGerald, Garret. 1963. *State sponsored bodies*. 2nd ed. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Flanagan, Charlie, and David Stanton. 2018. *Ministers Flanagan and Stanton report progress on female representation on State Boards*. Department of Justice and Equality. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR18000412>.
- Freidenvall, Lenita. 2020. Gender knowledge and gender expertise: The implementation of gender mainstreaming in Swedish state agencies. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27 (4): 742–64.
- Freidenvall, Lenita, and Madeleine Ramberg. 2021. Implementing gender mainstreaming in Swedish model municipalities. *Politics & Gender* 17 (2): 225–49.
- Gov.ie. 2002. Dáil Éireann debate, Thursday, 27 June 2002, Vol. 553 No. 7. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2002-06-27/226/>.
- . 2021. Gender equality in Ireland. [https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/d7752-gender-equality/?referrer=/en/GE/Pages/State\\_Boards](https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/d7752-gender-equality/?referrer=/en/GE/Pages/State_Boards).
- Howlin, Brendan. 2014. Howlin announces revised model for ministerial appointments to state boards. <https://www.per.gov.ie/en/howlin-announces-revised-model-for-ministerial-appointments-to-state-boards/>.

- Hughes, Melanie M., Pamela Paxton, and Mona Lena Krook. 2017. Gender quotas for legislatures and corporate boards. *Annual Review of Sociology* 43 (1): 331–52.
- Humbert, Anne Laure, Elisabeth K. Kelan, and Kate Clayton-Hathway. 2019. A rights-based approach to board quotas and how hard sanctions work for gender equality. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26 (4): 447–68.
- IPA. 2007. *Administration yearbook & diary*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- . 2018. *Ireland—A directory*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Jalalzai, Farida. 2016. Shattered not cracked: The effect of women's executive leadership. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 37 (4): 439–63.
- Jewson, Nick, and David Mason. 1986. The theory and practice of equal opportunities policies: Liberal and radical approaches. *Sociological Review* 34 (2): 307–34.
- Klettner, A., T. Clarke, and M. Boersma. 2016. Strategic and regulatory approaches to increasing women in leadership: Multilevel targets and mandatory quotas as levers for cultural change. *Journal of Business Ethics* 133 (3): 395–419.
- MacCarthaigh, Muiris. 2012. Politics, policy preferences and the evolution of Irish bureaucracy: A framework for analysis. *Irish Political Studies* 27 (1): 23–47.
- Madigan, Josepha. 2019. Minister Madigan announces appointment to the Arts Council, 12 May 2019. <https://www.chg.gov.ie/minister-madigan-announces-appointment-to-the-arts-council/>.
- Mensi-Klarbach, Heike, and Cathrine Seierstad. 2020. Gender quotas on corporate boards: Similarities and differences in quota scenarios. *European Management Review* 17 (3): 615–31.
- NWCI. 1998. *Who makes the decisions in 1997?: A review of gender balance on state boards in Ireland*. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.
- Ó Fátharta, Conall, and Gordon Deegan. 2018. Women on State boards hits 40%. Accessed 20/04/2020. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/women-on-state-boardshits-40-892481.html>.
- Piscopo, Jennifer M. 2015. States as gender equality activists: The evolution of quota laws in Latin America. *Latin American Politics and Society* 57 (3): 27–49.
- Piscopo, Jennifer M., and Susan Clark Muntean. 2018. Corporate quotas and symbolic politics in advanced democracies. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 39 (3): 285–309.
- Pollack, S. 2018. Average number of women on state boards exceeds 40% for first time. *Irish Times*, December 17, 2018. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/average-number-of-women-on-state-boards-exceeds-40-for-first-time-1.3733410>.
- Public Service Organization Review Group. 1969. *Report of the Public Service Organization Review Group*. Dublin: Stationary Office. <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/125895>.
- Quinlan, Áilín. 2016. Women on Ireland's State Boards. *WMB Now*.
- Ramos Martín, Nuria. 2013. Positive Action in EU Gender Equality Law: Promoting More Women in Corporate Decision Making? AIAS Working Paper (139). Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Rees, Teresa. 2005. Reflections on the uneven development of gender mainstreaming in Europe. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (4): 555–74.
- Rigolini, Alessandra, and Morten Huse. 2021. Women and multiple board memberships: Social capital and institutional pressure. *Journal of Business Ethics* 169 (3): 443–59.
- Roberts, Adrienne. 2015. The political economy of “transnational business feminism” problematizing the corporate-led gender equality agenda. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17 (2): 209–31.

- Selanec, Goran, and Linda Senden. 2013. *Positive action measures to ensure full equality in practice between men and women, including on company boards*. Luxembourg: EUR-OP.
- Sojo, Victor E., Robert E. Wood, Sally A. Wood, and Melissa A. Wheeler. 2016. Reporting requirements, targets, and quotas for women in leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly* 27 (3): 519–36.
- Stratigaki, Maria. 2005. Gender mainstreaming vs positive action: An ongoing conflict in EU gender equality policy. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12 (2): 165–86.
- Szydło, Marek. 2015. Gender equality on the boards of EU companies: Between economic efficiency, fundamental rights and democratic legitimisation of economic governance. *European Law Journal* 21 (1): 97–115.
- Teigen, Mari. 2012. Gender quotas on corporate boards: On the diffusion of a distinct national policy reform. In *Firms, boards and gender quotas: Comparative perspectives*, ed. Fredrik Engelstad and Mari Teigen, 115–46. Bingley: Emerald.
- Teigen, Mari, Eléonore Lépinard, and Ruth Rubio Marin. 2018. The 'natural' prolongation of the Norwegian gender equality policy institution. *Transforming gender citizenship: The irresistible rise of gender quotas in Europe*, ed. Eléonore Lépinard and Ruth Rubio-Marín, 341–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
- Terjesen, Siri, Ruth V. Aguilera, and Ruth Lorenz. 2015. Legislating a woman's seat on the board: Institutional factors driving gender quotas for boards of directors. *Journal of Business Ethics* 128 (2): 233–51.
- Terjesen, Siri, Ruth Sealy, and Val Singh. 2009. Women directors on corporate boards: A review and research agenda. *Corporate Governance: An International Review* 17 (3): 320–37.
- Whelan, Jennifer, and Robert Wood. 2012. Targets and quotas for women in leadership: A global review of policy, practice and psychological research. Melbourne: Gender Equality Project, Centre for Ethical Leadership, Melbourne Business School.