Women directors between the glass ceilings: assignments to senior board positions and gender

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In the recent years, the public pressure on the corporate sector to increase the share of women in leadership has been increasing in many countries. In many of these countries, this pressure was accompanied by the implementation of policies promoting women on boards, such as board gender quotas (Sojo et al. 2016; Seierstad et al. 2017). Among these countries, Germany implemented a mandatory gender quota for the supervisory boards of publicly quoted and fully co-determined companies in 2016 (Bozhinov, 2017). In contrast to Norway, the German quota applies not only to the shareholder representatives but also to the employee representatives which had implications for compliance. While shareholders had to increase the share of women strongly (in 2010 the share was about 5 percent), employees had to adjust the corresponding share less strongly (in 2010 employees had already 15 percent women among their representatives). Based on the role incongruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and the lack-of-fit model (Heilman, 1983), we show that the long-lasting tradition of gender equality in trade unions (and therefore also among employee-elected supervisors) lead to a comparative advantage for women on supervisory boards using a hand-collected dataset of the supervisory directors of all publicly quoted and fully co-determined companies from 2009 to2016. While women shareholder representatives are significantly less often promoted to senior board positions (vice-chair and the board's standing committees, such as the audit, nominating or personnel committee), this is not the case for women employee representatives. This has implications for women employee representatives. Due to the increased acceptance of women supervisors among employee representatives, current women employee representatives have the opportunity to exploit spillover effects to the shareholder-elected side of the board and help newly appointed women shareholder representatives to gain power. In doing so, employee representatives can help reduce gender bias in leadership.

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