



# Opposition to gender quotas in Sweden and Spain: Debates about gender equality in the film industry

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses how gender quotas in film policy are debated in the Spanish and Swedish film industries. By analysing public records, media material and interviews with industry stakeholders, four categories of arguments are found: (1) Arguments for quotas, articulating the problems women face in the industry; (2) Arguments against quotas related to the specificities of the industry; (3) Arguments for and against quotas which refer to women's shortcomings, and; (4) Arguments problematising quotas by feminists who want more transformative reforms. While policies are designed differently and have different conceptualisations of gender, arguments discussing quotas are similar in both countries. Gender equality policies in both countries seem unable to change the male norm in the industry. Arguments put forth by opponents tend to point to women's lack of talent and how quotas will jeopardise the industry, whereas feminist arguments problematising quotas point at the limitations of the reforms to seriously question structural inequalities.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse the debate about gender quotas in the Spanish and Swedish film industries. The recent attention to gender and diversity in the film sector in European countries has increased the number of states which have introduced gender equality measures in film policy (EAO, 2019). The burgeoning field studying gender equality in film<sup>2</sup> indicates that one of the most debated actions is the use of quotas or quota-like initiatives (Cobb & Williams, 2020; Liddy, 2020). However, cross-national comparisons have so far not been undertaken.

Previous research on gender quotas has mostly focused on sectors such as politics, corporate boards, or academia. Such research shows similarities in arguments against quotas in different geographical contexts as well as across sectors (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010; Teigen, 2016; Törnqvist, 2006). The similarities in how quotas are discussed is intriguing given that comparative research on gender equality reforms have found major difference across countries regarding reform design, scope and construction of gender (Kvist & Peterson, 2010; Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Squires, 2008). This calls for a cross-national

study of the arguments voiced for and against quotas.

Inspired by studies showing that gender equality policies have been opposed by anti-gender equality forces and by feminists (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017; Johansson & Lilja, 2013; Lilja & Johansson, 2018), this article's goal is to study how gender quotas in film policy are debated in Spain and Sweden with a special focus on how they are opposed. Mainstream newspaper articles and interviews with primary stakeholders are employed to analyse how the introduction of gender quotas in the policies regulating the Swedish and Spanish film industries have been received.

Both industries have undertaken quota-like reforms in their arsenal of gender equality measures. Both countries allocate public funding to support film production and are placed somewhere in the middle among European countries in terms of the size of film production (EAO, 2019: 60). However, when speaking in general terms about gender equality, Spain and Sweden are portrayed as opposites. Sweden is often depicted as a pioneer and forerunner when it comes to gender equality, featuring a dual breadwinner-dual carer gender regime (Sainsbury, 1999). Spain, on the other hand, is described as a strong male breadwinner-female

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<sup>2</sup> Research on women's conditions in film can be divided into feminist production studies (see e.g. Banks, 2018; Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2011), management and work life studies (see e.g. Liddy & O'Brien, 2021; Wing-Fai, Gill, & Randle, 2015) and studies of policy and women's conditions (see e.g. Liddy, 2020; Smith, Choueiti, Scofield, & Pieper, 2013). For an overview see Jansson, *fc*.

carer regime (Kvist & Peterson, 2010). Differences between the countries in elderly and childcare are striking (Williams & Gavanas, 2008), and female participation in the labour force is higher in Sweden (61.2%) than in Spain (56.2%) (Global Economy, 2021). However, Spain had a major change from a conservative tradition to adopting equality laws during 2007–2013 (Carlsson, 2020: 4), including reforms on care tasks, and compulsory equality plans for public and private organisations (Lombardo, 2016).

Turning to the film industry, Sweden reached 50% of women directors in films supported by public funding in 2016, an achievement attributed to the quota policy instigated in 2006 and promoted by the Swedish Film Institute (Jansson, 2016). While this achievement has been praised internationally (for discussion see Ryberg, 2020), the domestic debate has been more Janus-faced. Criticism has been voiced both from academics and feminist activists who argue that the gender equality project is not radical enough, as well as from those objecting to the entire project of trying to adjust gender inequality. In Spain, a 35% quota was incorporated in public film funds in 2020, generating both positive and negative reactions from the sector (Martínez, 2020, 2020b). A cross-national study of Sweden and Spain regarding discussions about quotas in the film industry is facilitated by the fact that both countries feature a quota and that the debates about gender inequality attract criticism from both feminists and opponents to the gender equality project.

The article is divided into a background section; a theoretical section including previous research; a section on material and methods; and four empirical sections, each developing a category of arguments. Finally, we make some concluding remarks.

### Gender in/equality and film policies in Sweden and Spain

The right to equality stated in the EU Treaty and Charter brought about a significant change: from the mere sanctioning of discrimination to encouraging concrete measures to overcome inequality (Pardo, 2010: 391). Among such measures, most European countries have included the diffusion of efforts to promote the equal entitlement of women to influence decision-making and to be present in all spheres of society (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013). Provision of public funding for film production is standard policy in Western Europe. According to a mapping of public funding criteria carried out by the European Audiovisual Observatory, 15 EU countries had gender equality support measures by the end of 2018 (EAO, 2019: 16).

Spanish film policy is regulated by the Film Law of 2007. That same year, the Equality Law was instigated, demanding public institutions to prove parity among the members of juries deciding on public grants. The Spanish Film Institute (ICAA), responsible for regulating the main funds at national level, has a committee in charge of assessing film projects according to a point system, which distributes 100 points across areas such as the artistic value of the project and the producer's background. In 2009, for the first time points were awarded for featuring a woman director and/or scriptwriter. Since then, the points scale has been changed to further increase the incentives to have women as directors, scriptwriters, producers and/or head of department (e.g. director of photography). In 2011, the label "Especially Recommended for the Promotion of Gender Equality" was implemented by the ICAA with the goal of making audiences aware of onscreen gender equal depictions. A major change took place in 2020, with the introduction of a binding quota reserving 35% of the ICAA's budget for projects directed by women. According to CIMA's – the Association of Women Filmmakers and from the Audiovisual Media – reports, the highest percentage of films directed by women and presented for competition at the Goya

Prize since 2015 is 30%, percentage reached in 2019 (Cuenca Suárez, 2020).<sup>3</sup> In 2020, this number decreased to 19% (Cuenca Suárez, 2021). The budget gap was reduced from a difference of 72% in 2016 to 26% in 2019, but then it went up again to 51% in 2020. Moreover, men are still the main recipients of the high-budget general aids – 65.72% of the 2020 projects under this category are directed by men – while women stay with smaller projects funded with selective aids<sup>4</sup> – 43.90% of the 2020 projects are directed by women (ICAA, 2021a).

The Swedish efforts to promote gender equality have a comparatively long history, beginning in 2000, when the government mandated the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) to promote gender equality. Since then, the SFI has collected gender-differentiated data, undertaken educational and communication efforts and carried out different bids to promote women behind the camera. The most important reform was the incorporation of the so called quota clause in the Film Agreement in 2006, setting the 40/60 ratio, and from 2013 the 50/50 goal, for the share of women and men in key positions (director, scriptwriter and producer) in all films with public production support (Film Agreement, 2006, 2013). The goal is not binding. In research, quotas are often defined as a means to increase the number of women, whether voluntary or binding by law (Gender Quotas Database, 2021). Hence, in this article we consider the goal as a non-binding quota. The goal has had effect on films with public funding from the SFI (Jansson, 2021). In feature-length fiction, the average share of women directors in film projects with public support from the SFI in the period 2016 to 2020 ranges between 23% and 65%, with an average of 49%. This high figure can be compared to the total number of feature length films with a woman as director (including films without public support), which is not as high. For instance, in 2020 films with support from the SFI feature 64% women directors, while films without scored 25% women (SFI, 2020). Regarding budgets, feature-length fiction films with women directors between 2013 and 2016 had on average a budget ranging between 66 and 86% of the budget for films with a man as director, while the budgets for documentaries are higher for projects with a woman director than a man director (SFI, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

### Gender equality policy and resistance: an approach

Efforts to implement gender equality policy have given rise to debates. Recent research on resistance against gender equality reforms have brought attention to the fact that criticism is provided by those opposing the idea of gender equality, but also by those who believe that the reforms are not strong enough. The first category, those opposing gender equality reforms, constitutes the "classical" object of studies of resistance against gender equality (e.g. Eduards & Wendt, 2011; Linghag, Ericson, Amundsdotter, & Jansson, 2016; Verloo, 2018). Such studies have focused on critical arguments in debates about the introduction of policy, but also on its implementation (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017; Mackay, 2014). Resistance against gender equality is multifaceted and sometimes even those in favour of reforms contribute to the resistance, which is sometimes called "friendly fire" (Roggeband, 2018).

The more recent discussion about feminist activists and academics who are critical against gender equality is underpinned by the analysis that the state has appropriated the demands of the women's movement, undermining the movements exigencies, and reframing the demands in ways that take away their critical edge (Eduards, 2002; Navarrete, Ruido, & Vila, 2005). The fact that the political project to promote

<sup>3</sup> CIMA has been publishing an annual report of women's presence in the film industry since 2015; however, it only considers the films registered for competition at the Goya Prize.

<sup>4</sup> Public funding in Spain can be general or selective. General aids, have bigger budgets and are open to independent production companies but also to television channels. Selective aids are exclusively for independent projects and those with "a special cinematographic, social or cultural value" (ICAA, 2021b).

gender equality has mainly become a top-down undertaking, producing new power relations, has provoked criticism (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017; Lilja & Johansson, 2018). Elisabeth Prügl labels current gender equality policies “governance feminism”, that is, the transformation of the feminist project into a form that suits the political machinery and is performing certain functions (Prügl, 2011). This has inspired research about feminist resistance to gender equality, which can be found within feminist organising, campaigning such as #metoo, and academic endeavours (Lilja & Johansson, 2018). The two-fold character of resistance against gender equality policy does not become less complicated by the fact that right-wing populists who oppose gender equality reforms sometimes embrace government efforts of gender equality as a means to encourage xenophobic ideas about “foreigners” as “the others” posing a threat to women (e.g. Farris, 2017; Sager & Mulinari, 2018). As noted by Ikävalko and Kantola (2017), this means that “feminist resistance is always intertwined with and in interplay with resistance to feminism”.

Research on debates about quotas in various contexts reveal how arguments against quotas highlight the fear that merit and competence will be lost, that important values will be compromised and that the reforms will not lead to the intended outcome (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010; Teigen, 2016). Opposition is similarly present in how quotas have been received in the film industry. In Sweden, the SFI's policy has been celebrated as an example of success, turning its CEO, Anna Serner, into a “champion for gender equality not only in Sweden but internationally” (Liddy, 2020), but it has also been criticised domestically both by those opposing gender equality and feminists (Ryberg, 2020). In Spain most women film workers celebrate gender equality measures, but others express concern about the quality of the reforms (Calderón-Sandoval, 2021; Martínez, 2020b).

## Methods and materials

Qualitative cross-national studies are often motivated by the need for “deep insider” knowledge, and because such studies may reveal what is taken for granted in different contexts (Åse & Wendt, 2019; Wendt, 2020). This article seeks to analyse the same phenomenon in two different countries, but as pointed out by Gómez and Kuronen (2011: 686), in qualitative studies comparing similar issues in different countries the comparative element is not the main aim, rather the comparison is used as an analytical tool which help us to read the material in a different way. This allows for tracing elements that otherwise might seem “natural”, enhancing a deeper knowledge about each context along with the comparison (see also Wendt, 2020). We have found that the approach to pinpoint similarities and differences between the countries have resulted in new insights about gender equality and film policy in both countries.

To analyse how gender quotas are debated we resort to three types of empirical materials: 1. Public records such as government bills, statistics and reports from the SFI and ICAA; 2. Articles from Swedish and Spanish dailies concerning gender equality in film; and 3. Interviews with industry stakeholders, including women film workers and representatives of the SFI and ICAA. The media material consists of articles from major daily newspapers. The Spanish case is based on two newspapers with national reach (*El País* and *El Mundo*). The Swedish case is based on a larger study of all national and local newspapers in Sweden, from which a representative sample is drawn including two papers with national reach (*Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*), and three local newspapers. The interviews with Swedish filmmakers and SFI's CEO's are from two series of interviews, one with 7 interviews in 2011 to 2013 (see Jansson & Bivald, 2013), and another with 24 interviews in 2018 to 2020 (see Jansson, 2021). Interviews with 14 Spanish filmmakers and ICAA's deputy were conducted between 2016 and 2017 (see Calderón-Sandoval, 2019), and 8 Zoom interviews in 2021. The interviews in Sweden were made in Swedish and in Spain in Spanish. All translations of quotes from interviews and newspapers have been done by the authors of this article.

We have analysed the materials searching for arguments for and against gender equality and quotas. We define arguments as statements made in connection to opinions about the quota or gender equality reform. Hence, some “arguments” have the character of mere statements or descriptions. For instance, saying that “films are mostly made by men” is a statement, but if uttered in close connection to having a positive opinion about the quota, the context turns it into an argument for quotas. Describing the quota as “historical repair” (Coixet in Belinchón, 2018), is an example where a description of what the quota does includes the argument that quotas are needed because the film industry is historically dominated by men.

The arguments have been sorted according to their content and to the source/person who express the argument. Based on the arguments we found, four main categories were identified: (1) Arguments for quotas articulating the problem women face in the industry; (2) Arguments against quotas related to the specificities of the film industry, put forth mainly by opponents to the gender equality project; (3) Arguments for and against quotas related to discussions on women's lack, used by opponents and by feminists alike, and; (4) Arguments against quotas by feminists who want more transformative reforms. We present our findings according to these four categories.

## Arguments for quotas: to counter inequality

In the debate in both countries, quotas are described as a means to correct the historical male dominance in the film industry and to force decision makers to “see” women. For example, director Icíar Bollaín is quoted in *El País* saying:

At first, quotas seem absurd; one has to hire talent. That said, quotas in film subsidies have been necessary .... Producers trust the boys; it is a boys club due to a cultural inertia. And when they have been forced to search for [women], they have discovered that there are women .... Spanish cinema could not afford to miss out on female talent. (Bollaín in Belinchón, 2021)

This aligns with several statements in Sweden arguing that “women are less visible” (SFI, 2013) in the industry and that the problem with quotas is to find enough women to fill all positions (e.g. Elwin, 2018 interview) (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
Arguments for quotas — describing the problem addressed.

Arguments	Indicative example from Spain	Indicative example from Sweden
Quotas are used to counter inequality behind the camera	“It is not about meeting the quota but restoring equality for women” (Yagüe in Riaño, 2019) “let's call it historical repair” (Coixet in Belinchón, 2018) “Creative spaces, whether audiovisual or whichever, belong to a masculinised world” (Clos, 2017 interview)	“In its essence this problem [that decision-makers in film seem to favour men] concerns the way we think” (Oxburgh in Arvidsson, 2006) “Historically, the male dominance among filmmakers has been overwhelming” (SOU, 2009:73, p. 139)
Quotas are necessary to produce equality on screen	“Public funding cannot be used to finance sexist or racist contents” (Olmos, 2021 interview) “The more women there are in cinema, the more they incorporate life stories that have to do with what they know” (Clos, 2017 interview)	“The audience consists of women and men who have the right to expect a greater plurality of narratives and perspectives” (SOU, 2009: 73, p. 141) “There is no specific female sensibility or way to make a film, but being a woman provides a unique experience to portray on screen” (Bendjelloul in Nilsson, 2013)

Even if the main points are the same in both countries inequalities are more directly addressed in Spain, asking for “historical repair” and “restoring equality”. The arguments from Sweden also refer to history, but they are articulated in more close connection to the film sector as such. Overall, the connection between the film industry and societal structures is more accentuated in the Spanish debate, and gender equality in the film sector is also associated with wider gender issues, such as childcare. A newspaper article concludes that: “In a country where women take 93.3% of the leave permits to care for their relatives, being a mother and a filmmaker become incompatible jobs while male parents continue filming” (Koch, 2018). Director Cecilia Ibáñez suggests that: “it is also necessary to budget everything that has to do with conciliation, care labour has to be included in the budgets of the films” (2021 Interview). In Sweden, discussions about women’s caring responsibilities are peculiarly absent from the debate about gender equality in the film sector. One possible reason to why this discussion is absent is the well-developed childcare system in Sweden, and the prevalent notion that fathers too are responsible for caring. However, women filmmakers testify to the conflicting demands involved in fulfilling expectations from the industry and caring duties, noticing that mothers are still expected to be the primary carer (Jansson & Wallenberg, 2021).

When it comes to arguments motivating quotas with expectations for a more diverse output on screen, we find similar ideas regarding how the (gendered) experiences of filmmakers will translate into a wider set of stories in films. However, in the material from Spain we find the manifest idea that public funding is incompatible with discriminating content. In Sweden, arguments referring to anti-sexist, anti-homophobic and anti-racist content (often under the rubric “norm critique”) are mainly used as critique of gender equality efforts, signalling that the arms-length principle – the idea that the state should not interfere with the creative process or the subject matter of artworks, such as films – is violated (e.g. Helmersson, 2018; Nordström, 2015).

To summarise, we have found similarities in how quotas are motivated by references to a historically male dominated industry and in terms of expectations for the quota to lead to the production of films where women’s (different) experiences are reflected. We have also found that the problems in the film sector are more directly connected to a societal gender structure in the Spanish debate. Further, in the Spanish debate, care work and the division of labour are articulated and connected to the gender equality reforms targeting film, which is not the case in Sweden.

### Arguments against quotas: creativity is not evenly distributed

Arguments based on the notion that the specific character of the film sector as a creative industry are not suitable for quotas, are of two kinds in the material: the first argues that quotas will corrupt creativity and the second that quotas jeopardise the quality of films (Table 2).

According to the position that quotas shouldn’t be used when dealing with artistic works, creativity rejects ideas of objectivity and measurability. Director and former film commissioner Marianne Ahrne’s argument that “there is no democracy in art” is similar to the Spanish writer Javier Marías discussion about the difference between art and other activities “[w]ork is measurable and quantifiable in objective terms ... art is not” (Marías, 2016). These arguments imply that talent, which is necessary to produce art, is not evenly distributed in the population – therefore principles of equality are not applicable.

While these arguments oppose the introduction of quotas, the second sort of argument targets the (potential) results of quotas. In Sweden, with a longer history of gender quotas in the film sector than Spain, the most common argument against the 50/50 has been that it jeopardises quality and ticket sales. In the Swedish debate about public film funding, artistic quality and ticket sales have been pitted against each other, constituting the central tension of public discussions. The argument that gender equality endangers both these values has been used both to say

**Table 2**

Arguments against quotas — highlighting specificities of the film industry.

Arguments	Indicative examples from Spain	Indicative examples from Sweden
Film is creative material and not suitable for equality reforms	“...the arts and what they imply – talent, genius, [...] These skills are not distributed fairly or proportionally...” (Marías, 2016)	“There is no democracy in art” (Ahrne in Hermele, 2004) “It is rigid. It has to be fifty-fifty, which is a totally hopeless criteria when it comes to creative material” (Hansson in Nordström, 2015)
Equality policies endanger quality and box office success	“I have seen shitty films by women directors and if it is shit it is shit” (Peña in Martínez, 2020b).	“It is irresponsible [to only consider gender equality] because we have the criteria of quality and ticket-sales to consider” (Elwin, 2018 interview) “It will not benefit film consumption if gender will dominate over other features of film production” (Dahlgren, 2013)

that the inclusion of more women endangers Swedes reputation as a film nation and that women are not skilled enough (Jansson, *fc*). For the record, it is intriguing to notice that the top three films on the SFI’s “reviewer”-index list since 2007 are made by women. The argument that gender equality jeopardises artistic quality and box-office numbers is not as strong in the Spanish material, albeit certain statements suggest an underlying reference to a (potential) conflict between quotas and film quality: “You don’t have to give funding to a woman just because she is a woman. You have to give it to her because she has talent (...) I have seen shitty films by women directors” (Peña in Martínez, 2020b).

Arguments based on the specificities of the film sector hence focus on film as creative material and propose that creativity is not evenly distributed nor objectively measurable. Given the current male dominance, they seemingly agree with the idea that men are more talented than women. However, they also seem to realise that this is not a viable position. Hence, they tend to stress that gender equality is an “amazing end, but [it does not motivate] straightjacketing creative people” (Helmersson, 2018), or quotas are articulated as “censorship” (Olmos, 2021 interview). Formulated like this, these arguments against quotas align with arguments defending free speech and the arms-length principle.

The potential conflict between gender equality policy and free speech informs the design of film policy. Regarding the design of quotas, the arms-length principle is most prominently visible by the fact that quotas are related to who makes the film, not the content of the films they make. Both in Spain and Sweden the assessment of and decision-making on what film projects should be funded are delegated to experts, in order to ascertain the arms-length principle. In Spain, film projects are evaluated by a selection committee whose members are industry professionals, with a two years appointment. In Sweden the system of film commissioners with great individual freedom has been in practice since the mid-1990s, when it replaced a jury-system. The commissioners are recruited from the industry for a time-limited appointment.

To conclude, arguments in both countries start from the idea that the film sector is special because it relates to creativity. Further, we have found that arguments about the effects of quotas are more common in Sweden than in Spain.

### Arguments for and against quotas: women as incapable victims

Criticism against gender equality policy based on ideas about gender difference form a strong strand in both countries. Anti-feminist Spanish



and Swedish arguments are similar in that they target women for being less talented, less ambitious and less willing to make the effort to become filmmakers on their own account, hence pitting women themselves as the reason for inequality in the industry. Feminist critique of quotas, on the other hand, points to the dilemma that gender equality policies are designed so that they reproduce the idea that women are victims in need of help, a construction of women that may reproduce inequality rather than reduce it (Table 3).

In the 2020 reforms of Spanish film policy, films directed by women are labelled as “difficult audiovisual works”, a category created by the EU to allow for larger public support (EC, 2013: 11). Even though it is done as a positive action, the underlying implication of this terminology reproduces the idea that profitable films are made by men, while “women’s cinema” stories are marginal. Even before the implementation of the quota, Spanish women filmmakers were aware of the “stigma” that comes with positive actions, as producer Yolanda Olmos explains, “the points stigmatise (...) the sector, perversely, send... women [the] message: ‘they give you these projects because of the points, not for your work, not for your talent’” (interview Olmos, 2021).

In Sweden, the quota goal is not framed under the “difficult works” label, and films made by women are supported in the same fashion as films made by men. However, the notion that women filmmakers need help to produce more commercially successful films is present in the debate: “men have more confidence compared to women in the film industry, [the girls] need to get a push in the back...” (Zetterman in Eliasson, 2011). This is an example of women’s “lower confidence” and “different career-paths” being used as arguments for the necessity of gender equality reforms (see also Björling, 2009; Lindblad, 2012). In both countries, we can thus identify a line of argument that frames gender quotas as supporting women who lack competence or ambition. Even if these arguments differ in wording and style, they are similar in the sense that they seek to identify the cause of women’s subjection and find two potential culprits — either women themselves, or gender equality policy.

It is intriguing that women are constructed in very similar ways in both countries, despite the fact that the reforms are very different in their articulation of gender. In Swedish film policy, quotas are framed as “gender neutral”, that is, they are designed to correct the balance in favour of the so-called disadvantaged gender. In Spain, most positive actions are explicitly framed to benefit women: extra points for films

with women in key positions, films directed by women regarded as “difficult works”, and 35% of the budget reserved for women (Koch, 2020; Order CUD/582/2020, 2020). However, the logic behind the label “Especially Recommended for the Promotion of Gender Equality”, introduced in 2011 has a gender neutral framing of its focus on contents, regardless of who makes the films. The difference in framing policies to target “women” or as having a “gender neutral” approach does not seem to affect the debate, in which it is assumed that reforms will benefit women. Interestingly, based on our study it seems that regardless of whether policies clearly state who will benefit from them or not, the debate about them tend to obscure the fact that the problem underlying the introduction of policy is structural in a way that benefits men.

### Arguments problematising quotas: the problem is wider than numbers

Arguments criticising gender equality policies from a feminist perspective in both countries have highlighted quotas’ limitations, pointing to the problems that quotas do not solve: women still have to work with reduced budgets and still risk being subject of harassment. A recent anthology (Liddy, 2020) discussing gender equality measures undertaken in public film support schemes shows striking similarities in what weaknesses are found in these policies across countries: they are often vague and without a plan for implementation (Thorsen, 2020), only those film projects with access to public funding benefit from the efforts, and measures seldom target below-the-line workers (Cobb & Williams, 2020; Thorsen, 2020). Further, gender quotas neglect various other discrimination axes like race, age and social class. According to Cobb, Williams, and Wreyford (2018), this seems to be true even if diversity measures are included in the policy, which is the case of the British Film Institute Film Fund, which asks all applicants to meet the BFI Diversity Standards (EAO, 2019: 323).

In Spain, the fact that women have to adjust their stories to lower budgets has been increasingly mentioned in the media (Belinchón, 2017; Marcos, 2021; Riaño, 2019) and was actualised by CIMA’s reports. The budget gap has also been criticised by Swedish women filmmakers and feminist scholars (Jansson, 2021). The idea that quotas are not enough, which underlies the arguments discussed in this section, indicates that there are structural obstacles that go beyond the industry itself (Table 4). These problems will not go away after adjusting the numbers of women behind the camera.

Spanish women film workers have insisted that the budget gap results in what is labelled “women’s cinema” with a distinctive interest in “intimate” stories. According to this argument, women make “small” films because of the precarity they face in the industry (Zecchi, 2014: 124): “The prophecy is self-fulfilling: investors put a stamp on female directors, give them an average budget which is almost 50% lower than that of men ... and they often propose intimate films” (Koch, 2018). Nevertheless, some women directors also vindicate the validity of this type of film: “A change in value is needed so that intimate cinema, which does not reproduce the mainstream codes, can also be regarded as top-notch” (Cardona in Koch, 2018). In Sweden, the budget gap issue has been actualised by WIFT Sweden (Granqvist, 2015 interview; Jansson, 2017), and it has also been picked up on by the SFI, who provided a major statistical report in 2018. The SFI’s work to change the gender budget gap has included bids to promote women as directors of films with the highest budgets (SFI, 2016). Since such films are often made with rather strict demands on formats and content, they often feature “circumscribed artistic control and lesser possibilities to break conventions” (Jansson, 2021). Comparing the Spanish and Swedish cases it is interesting to note that either women do low budget films with “women’s” content (Spain) or they are encouraged to adjust to what is considered commercially viable (Sweden).

Another limitation with quotas, pointed out by feminist voices, is its lack of intersectional awareness. In Spain this debate has not yet reached mainstream media, but it is a hot issue on the agenda of Spanish

**Table 3**  
Arguments against quotas — constructing gender.

Arguments	Indicative examples from Spain	Indicative examples from Sweden
Women do not want to make films/films with large budgets	“Maybe it’s women who do not want to. Directing is a very demanding job. It could be the case that women prefer a more orderly, less risky job” (Querejeta in Martínez, 2020a).	“In order to have their own freedom and do their own projects, they [women] have opted out of the big projects and gone more into narrower projects and documentaries” (Ryborn, 2012 interview).
Women are not competent enough/must work harder	“We should not be reduced only to intimate and low-budget films, because then it is difficult for the industry to see in us an example of profitability. We have to trust ourselves more” (Cruz in García, 2017).	“women make bad films that do not attract an audience” (Sundvall in Prage, 2010).
Quotas construct women as victims	“...No artist wants to be a quota or a number, but to be recognised for their talent. [Quotas] would stay only until inequality is overcome” (Lozano in Belinchón & Koch, 2018).	“[Quotas] cement...the myth about women as weak and in need of help” (Haldesten, 2004).

**Table 4**

Arguments problematising quotas — exposing quotas' limitations.

Arguments	Indicative examples from Spain	Indicative examples from Sweden
The budget gap	"Women directors shoot with half the budget that men have. ... that's utter disrespect" (Gutiérrez in Llanos Martínez, 2020) "[(There is) a very clear discrimination in the budgets obtained by women (...)] And this determines the content that women can create" (Yagüe, 2016 interview)	"Only four [out of 15] high-budget films are directed by women" (SFI, 2018: 12).
Lack of intersectionality	"There would have to be quotas for both migrant and/or racialised professionals, and for projects that contemplate the ethnic and cultural diversity of Spanish society (...) we are five million immigrants in Spain" (Alkimim, 2021 interview).	"There exists in the film industry (...) an unequal power structure that affects older women and women who are racialised. As a result, these groups are often made invisible, both in front of the camera and behind it" (SFI, 2021: 1)

associations of women film workers:

When we started as Dones Visuals, we thought that we were accompanying and fighting for the rights of all women working in the Catalan audiovisual industry. ... but in the end we were all white, we were all from one place, obviously from different social class, but there was a prevalent whiteness. (Olmos, 2021 interview)

On February 2021, a Delegation of Migrant and Racialised Women in the Film Industry was created within CIMA, with the aim of providing a space "to analyse how we are being represented and to claim what we see as legitimate (...). There would have to be quotas for both migrant and/or racialised professionals, and for projects that contemplate the ethnic and cultural diversity of Spanish society" (Alkimim, 2021 interview). Quotas for minority languages within Spanish territory have also been at the core of the debate in the Basque country, where a project in Euskara and directed by a woman gets twenty extra points in the regional public funds assessment. Public and private television, however, do not go beyond "a letter of intent": "We had experience with quotas for Euskara, on televisions and subsidies. That made cinema in Euskara flourish. But now that they have managed to get people to produce in Euskara, television eliminated quotas for either Euskara or women" (Izaguirre, 2021 interview).

In Sweden, diversity was inserted in the 2013 film agreement, but it was not supported by a quota goal; nevertheless, work on diversity and gender equality has been criticised in media along with gender equality as "identity politics" (e.g. Nordström, 2015). WIFT Sweden dedicated the entire CARLA Film Festival held in Karlskrona 2020 to the issue of intersectionality (CARLA, 2020) and the SFI's latest report, "Which Women?" (SFI, 2021), focuses on this issue. Further LGBTQ+ is addressed in the "Facts and Figures 2020" report (SFI, 2021). Sweden saw a regionalisation of public film support in the 1990s (Johannisson, 2010; Blomgren, 2007). However, this process has not been motivated by language or diversity reasons, but rather by arguments about supporting local economic development. The increased economic reasoning and neoliberal logic in film policy since the turn of the century has entrenched regionalisation, gender equality and diversity policies:

...diversity and representation have an as-yet-untapped potential in Swedish film, both commercially and qualitatively (...) these groups [old and racialised women] are often made invisible, both in front of the camera and behind it. This, in turn, means that the film industry risks missing out on narratives and talent with the potential to attract new and larger film audiences (SFI, 2021: 1).

This report, which was launched as a gender equality report, indicates that intersectionality is treated as a "quota within quotas" issue in Sweden as in Spain.

To conclude, the problematisation of quotas regarding the gender budget gap and intersectionality are the same in both countries, but the policy differs. In Sweden both challenges are tackled at an institutional level, which is not the case in Spain. However, in Sweden the discourse is heavily influenced by a commercial logic and a male norm. In Spain, the gender budget gap is criticised for being encouraged by the gender

equality policy, and women film professionals are divided between those who stand for recognition of a "minor" cinema, thus questioning industrial standards, and those who demand the opportunity to make films with bigger budgets and mainstream ambitions. As for the intersectional question, there's a tendency in both countries to frame equality and diversity as opponents/competitors — "the quota over quota issue" (Rodríguez, 2021 interview).

### Concluding remarks

Our cross-national comparison regarding discussions about quotas has allowed for new insights about gender equality and film policy in Sweden and Spain. We have seen that both countries display a rather high-pitched debate, featuring opposition against gender equality from camps that are critical to the entire project, and from those in favour of reform to promote women and other subjected groups. Arguments which point at the creative status of the film industry go to the extent of designating quotas as "Stalinist", in the words of the Swedish director, and at the time film commissioner at the SFI, Marianne Ahrne (Fjellman Jaderup, 2004; Hermele, 2004), or as "secondary and ornamental", according to Spanish writer Javier Marías (2016). The criticism that gender equality is in conflict with the arms-length principle has recently gained traction in the Swedish government, as the newly appointed minister of culture, Jeanette Gustafsdotter, decided to delete a formulation about gender equality and diversity in the instruction to the SFI for the year 2022 (Källén, 2021). This political signal was sent after Anna Serner resigned as CEO in the autumn of 2021, and before the newly appointed CEO Anette Novak started in April 2022.

This study has highlighted the differences in how gender reforms are articulated. In Spain, the idea that inequality in the film industry is linked to wider social structures is more salient. The hopes tied to the quota are also more radical — more women may lead to changing women's position in the industry but may also lead to major changes in how women are represented on screen and what films are produced. In Sweden, the problems are described in terms more specific to the film industry and in closer proximity to the reforms already in place. In comparison with Spain, it is striking how the discussion about gender equality in Sweden abide by the ways that gender equality is formulated by the government, and how restricted the discussions are to the film industry. Ideas about how film can contribute to a wider struggle for women's liberation and how wider patriarchal structures pose problems for women in the film industry are almost non-existent.

An important difference in policy is the "gender neutral" wording in Sweden as opposed to the insistence on quotas as beneficial to "women" in Spain. However, this difference does not seem to affect the debate. The arguments for or against quotas firmly suggest that quotas are to the benefit of women (and the detriment of men). This idea opens up for the entire line of argument stating that women are lacking skills and will make bad films, which will jeopardise the entire industry if quotas are introduced. This criticism shows major similarities across the two countries. There are also similarities in how quotas are depicted as "aids" for women, and how this gives rise to arguments that quotas construct women as victims in need of assistance. However, this

argument is also used to expose the patriarchal scaffoldings of gender inequality in the film industry. Hence, these are double-edged arguments in both contexts.

In Spain, where it seems to be more allowed to speak about the content of the films produced and where the policies have been pioneering in their inclusion of women's films under the EU category of "difficult works", policy has given rise to a tension among women film workers between favouring "minor" cinema or more commercially oriented cinema. In Sweden, this tension is less salient – even if it exists – and the budget gap is discussed primarily in terms of having more women directors in large budget film projects. The problematisation of intersectionality follows the general pattern, where Sweden features a more institutionalised approach informed by a logic of economy, while in Spain women's organising and demands for positive actions are more important.

The main finding from our comparison is that despite transnational integration and both countries being part of the EU, the policies are designed very differently both when it comes to how gender is conceptualised in the reforms, and in the way they tackle the problem of gender inequality. However, the debates in Spain and Sweden are rather similar. Arguments against quotas tend to point to women's lack of talent and how quotas will jeopardise the industry. Arguments problematising quotas and the remaining challenges are similar in both countries too, pointing to the limitations of the reforms to seriously question structural inequalities. Quotas seem unable to challenge the male norm in both industries, but they also seem to be required as a direct measure to counter the historical male dominance in the sector. Our results indicate that further reforms must clearly frame quotas as a matter of social justice and multiple perspectives rather than as "help" for "incapable women" or as a menace to creative freedom. Moreover, reforms must not limit their goals to quantitative changes if they are to effectively tackle the unequal gender structure so deeply ingrained into the film industry.

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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