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Quota women threaten men:

Unveiling the (counter-)stereotypization of beneficiaries of affirmative action policies

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### **Abstract**

Two studies carried out among Albanian public-sector employees examined the impact of different types of affirmative action policies (AAPs) on the (counter-)stereotypical perception of women in decision-making positions. Study 1 ( $N=178$ ) revealed that participants—especially women—perceived women in decision-making positions as more masculine (i.e., agentic) than feminine (i.e., communal). Study 2 ( $N=239$ ) showed that AAPs impacted the attribution of gender stereotypes to their beneficiaries differently as a function of policy type. Women benefiting from quota policy were perceived as more communal than agentic, while those benefiting from weak preferential treatment were perceived as more agentic than communal. Furthermore, we examined how judging that AAPs threaten men's access to decision-making positions influenced the attribution of these traits to AAPs beneficiaries. Results showed that men who reported high levels of perceived threat, compared to men who reported low levels, attributed more communal than agentic traits to the beneficiaries of quotas. These findings suggest that AAPs may backlash against its beneficiaries by emphasizing the gender stereotypical or counter- stereotypical traits. Thus, the framing of AAPs, for instance as a matter of enhancing organizational performance, in the process of policy making and implementation becomes a crucial tool to counter the potential backlash.

Keywords: affirmative action policies, gender stereotypical traits, threat

## Quota women threaten men:

### Unveiling the (counter-)stereotypization of beneficiaries of affirmative action policies

In European societies, the achievements of women in education are equal to or even supersede those of men (European Commission, 2015), and there are no gender differences in job performance (Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012). Hence, it is reasonable to expect that women and men should possess equal opportunities to succeed at the outset of their professional or academic career. Yet, women are still underrepresented at all hierarchical levels in private companies and public organizations (European Commission, 2015; European Commission Justice, 2014; OECD, 2016). A widely spread assumption is that combining parenthood with a professional career is more challenging for women than men, due to the enduring prevalence of traditional role models (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, evidence shows that even when elements such as personal ambition and family status are taken into account, women appear to have fewer opportunities in their careers compared to equally qualified and experienced men (for reviews, see Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012).

To address this issue, policy makers across Europe have developed various affirmative action policies (AAPs) and good practices aiming to improve the representation of women at different job levels, and to narrow the persistent gender gap in leadership positions (European Commission Justice, 2014). Most international organizations promoting reform in development and transition countries recommend AAPs to bridge the gender gap (Klettner, Clarke, & Boersma, 2014). Furthermore, the European Union introduced legislation to set a mandatory 40% quota for women on corporate boards (European Commission Justice, 2014).

Yet, in public discourse on gender-based affirmative action, there is a chronic ambiguity about the actual goals of these policies. Are they just considered as measures to

give women the same opportunities as to men, or do they aim at ‘feminizing’ the established corporate culture?

The implementation of gender quotas is related to greater female representation in leadership positions (Sojo, Wood, Wood, & Wheeler, 2016). However, AAPs often encounter strong opposition (Crosby, Sabattini, & Aizawa, 2013; Faniko, 2015; Iyer, 2009), engender a stigmatization of AAP beneficiaries (for reviews, see Crosby et al., 2013; Leslie, Mayer, & Kravitz, 2014), and make the organizations that use them less attractive as employers (Windscheid, Bowes-Sperry, Mazei, & Morner, 2015). In fact, quotas are often considered as arbitrary measures that do not take the personal ambitions and motivations of the applicants into account, leading to the appointment of underqualified applicants, thus discriminating qualified and motivated men. Notwithstanding this critique, there is evidence showing that an increased representation of women in management is not only legitimized by the need to overcome a historically-rooted imbalance, but also boosts corporate performance (Ellemers, 2014; Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009). Indeed, communal (i.e., stereotypically feminine) traits reveal to be as necessary to good leadership as agentic (i.e., stereotypically masculine) ones; however, many still think that a masculine leadership style is to be preferred to the feminine. In the former case, the norms adopted to evaluate men and women applying for management positions would be considered as neutral and universal, while in the latter the agentic management culture is not considered as gender-neutral any more, and the promotion of female managers goes hand in hand with the quest for a more communal and consensus-based approach to management.

### **Type of affirmative action policies and the perception of beneficiaries**

Affirmative action policies for women aim at increasing their representation in areas such as employment, education, and politics) in which they are typically under-represented (Crosby et

al., 2013). AAPs comes in a variety of types, based on the extent to which individual merit and group membership are weighted in the selection decisions (Harrison et al., 2006). Some AAPs, known as *strong preferential treatment*, set the priority on group membership. The best known one is gender quotas, which specify that a minimum percentage of positions are reserved for women, and consider the qualifications only within the under-represented group. Other policies, known as *weak preferential treatment* (WPT), consider individual merit as more relevant than group membership. In this case, women should be given preference over men if, and only if, their qualifications are equivalent.

However, AAPs may reduce women's inclination to apply (Nater & Sczesny, in press). They may also harm them (for reviews, see Crosby et al., 2013; Leslie et al., 2014). For example, women hired under strong preferential treatment are often associated with a stigma of incompetence (e.g., Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997; Heilman, Battle, Keller, & Lee, 1998; Resendez, 2002), and tend to receive negative predictions for their career progress (Heilman et al., 1992). Moreover, they are rated lower on leader effectiveness and prototypical leadership characteristics (DeMatteo, Dobbins, Myers, & Fecteau, 1996), which are close to the traits traditionally expected in men. In contrast, one of the few studies that also considered WPT showed that women selected under this type of affirmative action evaluated their own performance more positively than participants selected under a strong preferential treatment (Heilman et al., 1998).

Non-specific AAPs have been shown to result in communal (or feminine) representations of its beneficiaries (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2002). However, the attribution of stereotypical gender traits to women in decision-making positions selected with different AAPs compared to women selected without these policies is yet to be examined. This is nevertheless crucial, since the traits that are sought after for leaders are still predominantly agentic (that is, stereotypicality masculine), as previous literature shows (Schein, 2001). To

fill this gap, the present study examined to what extent and through which mechanisms different forms of AAPs result in women being perceived as agentic and/or communal.

### **Perceived gender stereotypical traits**

Communality and agency refer to traits and behaviors that are culturally associated with women and men, respectively (Twenge, 1997). *Communality* refers to affectionate, gentle, cheerful, and understanding traits (Bem, 1974). Women are expected to be socially sensitive and interested in others (Eagly, 1987; Hall, 1984), and to be tolerant and peaceful (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Williams & Best, 1982). In contrast, *agency* is defined in terms of instrumental traits. As men are traditionally expected to display assertiveness, to defend their beliefs, and to be willing to take risks (Bem, 1974), to strive for independence (Stake, 2000), to behave in a dominant, competitive, and autonomous way (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Wohlers, 1986), and to have a high regard for their own interests (Kray & Thompson, 2005), agentic traits are considered as an expression of masculinity.

Women and men display both types of traits to a certain extent. In Western cultures, agentic traits are now found to be increasingly expressed by women (while the reverse, that is an increase in communal traits, has not been observed among men; Twenge, 2001). Reflecting the asymmetrical nature of gender categories, agency is generally more valued—and sought after, in both men and women—than communality, often seen as more exclusively female. For instance, women featuring strong agentic traits tend to be considered as more qualified than men displaying communal traits (Twenge, 2001). Agency and communality also carry information related to the individuals' (perceived) status (Gerber, 2009). This relationship between agency and power/status explains why traits that are sought after for leaders tend to overlap with agentic traits. The “think manager—think male” phenomenon (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996) has indeed been shown to exist across cultures (e.g., in Germany and in

the United Kingdom, Schein & Mueller, 1992; in China and in Japan, Schein et al., 1996).

Accordingly, it is not surprising that women in high positions have been found to be perceived by others as rather agentic, as well as to describe themselves predominantly in agentic terms (e.g., female leaders in sample of German managers, Sczesny, 2003; female professors in Italy, Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004). While the suitability of agentic traits for leadership positions has been called into question (see for instance Eagly & Carli, 2003), this way of thinking is still rather common.

### **Perceived threat to men's access in decision-making positions**

Because circumstances that threaten the non-beneficiaries' position in the social hierarchy are likely to activate gender stereotypes, we further included in our consideration the concept of threat. Generally, perceiving an outgroup as threatening the political or economic power of the ingroup is a strong predictor of negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward this outgroup (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Keller, 2005; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). When it comes to AAPs, it is established that those who do not benefit from these measures (e.g., men) judge that an AAP undermines their group's capacity to obtain job opportunities and promotions (see Renfro, Duran, Stephan, & Clason, 2006). Accordingly, men who feel that an AAP threatens their chances of moving up the career ladder may propagate stereotypical gender beliefs about the beneficiaries of that policy with the aim of legitimizing and of securing the existing social structure (Brewis, 2001; Fuss, 1989; Gould, 1981). By attributing communal and often devalued traits to women hired under AAPs, they describe these women as unfit for leadership positions. In line with this assumption, Morton, Hornsey, & Postmes (2009) found that essentialist beliefs (e.g., attributing communal traits to women as a group) "might be mobilized particularly when the status hierarchy is threatened, and particularly by those who are advantaged by that hierarchy" (p. 655).

Among the different types of affirmative action, strong forms such as quotas, in comparison to WPT, are even more likely to engender feelings of group threat among men. Indeed, if quotas are applied, that is if a given percentage of decision-making positions is reserved for women, despite the alleged shortage of female candidates fulfilling the expected requirements, the chances of qualified men to be selected decrease proportionally. In contrast, because of the emphasis on the beneficiaries' skills, WPT undermines men's opportunities to access to decision-making positions to a much lesser extent. WPT is a measure which only becomes effective if there is a blunt discrimination of qualified women. As most men support an allegedly meritocratic career system based on the recognition of virtues of agentic traits for effective management, men as members of a social group do not necessarily feel threatened by women who feature strong agentic traits. For these reasons, we make here the assumption that the more men perceive gender quotas as a threat to their access to decision-making positions, the more they will stress intergroup boundaries, by describing quota beneficiaries as more communal than agentic.

### **The current research**

This research was carried out in Albania, a country characterized by widely shared traditional gender stereotypes (UNDP, 2014). During the *socialist period*, gender equality in Albania was part of the official ideology and resulted in a high participation of women in the workforce and in decision-making bodies (Danaj, 2014). The regime promoted an egalitarian ideology, but did not depart from the traditional equation between leadership and agentic traits. Furthermore, Albanian society was characterized by clearly gender-stereotyped roles in the private sphere (e.g., domestic and child-raising duties are attributed to women). During the *post-socialist period*, Albania opted for a "fast-track" approach to speed up the convergence

with Western societies (Gjermeni, 2012) based on the “sandwich strategy”. International, governmental and non-governmental organizations promoted social change through top-down with a series of legal conventions and development programs. In the same time, local civil society organizations completed these efforts with bottom-up initiatives (Raicheva-Stober & Ibroscheva 2014). In 2008, Albanian Parliament adopted the “Gender Equality in Society” law. This law introduced a quota of 30% for the underrepresented gender in both elected and nominated positions in all legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, as well as in other public sector institutions (Labour Code, 2008). However, the provisions of the Gender Equality in Society” law are only implemented for the election to political offices (Gjermeni, 2012). WPT is not regulated by a legislative framework and in this study it has been presented hypothetically in order to compare its effect as a soft form of AA with the effect of quota as a group-based hard form. A comparison of opinions toward the quotas and WPT provides the possibility to illuminate how the resistance takes shape, and in turn how resistance can be countered.

### **Pilot study**

Most research on stereotypical feminine and masculine traits has been conducted in Western countries (e.g., in France, see Fontayne, Sarrazin, & Famose, 2000; in the UK, see Colley, Mulhern, Maltby, & Wood, 2008; in the US, see Auster & Ohm, 2000). To assess whether similar representations of women and men were to be found in the context of the present study, we conducted a pilot study with 20 female and 20 male employees from different public sector institutions in Tirana—the capital of Albania—which employs the highest number of public sector employees in the country. Participants were recruited by email and were invited to report at least ten typical characteristics of women and ten typical characteristics of men. These traits served as the pool from which the communal and agentic

traits were chosen for the main study. Characteristics attributed to both men and women have been excluded (e.g., competent). The communal (sensitive to others' needs, compassionate, tolerant, understanding, flexible, and tender) and agentic (forceful, decisive, dominant, self-confident, defends own beliefs, and willing to take a stand) identified in this pilot study demonstrate almost perfect overlap with those in the existing literature (e.g., Bem, 1974; Feingold, 1994, for a meta-analysis).

### **Study 1**

The first study seeks to examine the attribution of agentic and communal traits to women hired under conventional hiring procedures in Albania, and whether the pattern of the attribution is similar to pattern documented in other cultural contexts.

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 107 women and 71 men employed in different public sector institutions in Tirana (Albania). The ages ranged from 19 to 62 years old ( $M = 33.50$ ,  $SD = 9.23$ ). Participants were contacted at their workplace by the first author of this paper and asked to complete an online survey.

##### **Dependent Measures**

**Communal and agentic traits.** Participants were invited to indicate to what degree communal (sensitive to others' needs, compassionate, tolerant, understanding, flexible, and tender) and agentic (forceful, decisive, dominant, self-confident, defends own beliefs, and willing to take a stand) traits characterize women in decision-making positions (e.g., director, deputy director, head of unit, or head of office), using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). To confirm that agentic and communal traits constitute two distinct dimensions, we conducted a factor analysis with Promax rotation (an oblique rotation was used since agentic and communal traits—all positive—are generally positively

intercorrelated). As expected, agentic and communal items loaded onto two distinct factors ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ). The first factor (communal dimension) accounted for 41.17% of the total variance, and the second (agentic dimension) 16.90% (all item loadings above .49). Coefficients alpha were .87 and .81 for communal and agentic dimension respectively.

### Results

To examine the impact of participant gender on the attribution of communal and agentic traits, a mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed, with repeated measures on the last factor and participant age as covariate. As expected, findings revealed that participants attributed more agentic than communal traits to women in decision-making positions, ( $M_{agentic} = 5.07, SD = 1.15; M_{communal} = 4.50, SD = 1.37$ ),  $F(1,163) = 4.19, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ). The results showed a significant interaction between participant gender and stereotypical gender traits,  $F(1,163) = 6.15, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ). In comparison with men, women attributed more agentic traits to women in decision-making positions, ( $M_{women} = 5.40, SD = 1.08; M_{men} = 4.62, SD = 1.09, p < .001$ ). However, there was no such significant difference for communal traits ( $M_{women} = 4.61, SD = 1.34; M_{men} = 4.35, SD = 1.39, p = .15$ ). Finally, there was no significant interaction between participant gender and age on the attribution of communal and agentic traits,  $F(1, 163) = .54, p = .47, \eta_p^2 = .003$ ).

### Discussion

The results of this first study replicated prior findings that women in decision-making positions are considered as more agentic than communal (Schein et al., 1996), especially by other women (Deal & Stevenson 1998). This first study provides initial evidence that women in decision positions in Albania hired with a conventional hiring procedure are perceived as more agentic than communal. However, the attribution of these stereotypical traits may change if the women are selected through different types of AAPs. We conducted a second

study to investigate whether the fact of being a beneficiary of such a measure changes the way women in decision-making positions are perceived.

## **Study 2**

Study 2 has two goals. First, it seeks to examine how the implementation of WPT as opposed to quota affects the attribution of agentic and communal traits to its beneficiaries. This comparison allows us to distinguish more explicitly the impact of an AAP in which group membership prevails over individual merit (quota) and that in which individual merit prevails over group membership (weak preferential treatment). As previously hinted, we expect that gender quotas, which emphasize group membership as the most important criterion during the hiring procedure, will promote representation of female leaders characterized by less pronounced agentic traits and more pronounced communal traits (Hypothesis 1).

Second, in Study 2 we seek to obtain evidence for the role of perceived threat to the patriarchal order in explaining why women hired with quota policy are perceived as more communal and less agentic than those hired with a WPT. As argued in the general introduction, there is good reason to assume that if the share of women in management increases, a predominantly agentic management culture could be threatened, as women are expected to feature strong communal traits (Hypothesis 2). The perceived threat to this established – and possibly widely accepted – management culture, does not intrinsically imply gender differences, as it can be equally plausibly be felt among women, who may justify and accept existing social order. However, men may feel this threat more strongly than women. If a given percentage of decision-making positions is reserved for women, the chances of qualified men to be selected decrease proportionally. This might account for a feeling of threat among men, which in turn explains their tendency to essentialize women selected through a quota policy (Hypothesis 3).

## Method

### Participants

The sample comprised 239 (119 women and 120 men) employees from different public sector institutions in Tirana (Albania). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old ( $M = 41.28$ ,  $SD = 10.28$ ). Participants were contacted at their workplace and were invited to fill in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire.

**Procedure.** The questionnaire consisted of an introduction of bogus information, followed by two experimental condition (independent variable), and a series of items assessing perceived threat to men's participation in decision-making positions and attribution of communal and agentic traits to beneficiaries of AAP (dependent variables). Participants were invited to read a bogus information organized in two parts. The first part consisted of the following scenario: "According to a recent census carried out in Albanian public institutions, women hold only 20% of decision-making positions. Following the publication of this census, several public sector institutions have decided to apply a hiring policy aimed at increasing the representation of university educated women in decision-making positions in the public sector (e.g., director, deputy director, head of unit, or head of office)." Next, the information provided to participants varied according to experimental condition (Faniko, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Buschini, & Chatard, 2012): In the *quota* condition, participants read: "This policy holds that 30% of decision-making positions are reserved for women. When a woman and a man are in competition for a decision-making position, the woman should be selected in order to meet this quota and to increase women's representation in these positions." In the *weak preferential treatment* condition, participants read: "This policy holds that when a woman and a man are in competition, the woman should be selected if their skills are equivalent."

**Dependent Measures.** Participants were then invited to evaluate the extent to which they perceived the AAP as threatening to men's participation in decision-making positions. Finally, they attributed a list of communal and agentic traits to AAPs beneficiaries.

**Perceived threat to men's participation in decision-making positions.** Perceived threat was measured through two items ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ): "This policy will reduce men's opportunities to have access to decision-making positions" and "This policy will reduce the power of men who hold decision-making positions in public institutions" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

**Communal and agentic traits.** The items used to assess the perceived communality and agency of the beneficiaries were identical to the items used in the Study 1. A factor analysis with Promax rotation performed on the communal and agentic traits extracted two empirically and conceptually distinct factors ( $r = .13, p = .05$ ). The first factor (agentic dimension) accounted for 45% of the total variance, and the second (communal dimension) 32.29% (all item loadings above .80). Alpha coefficients for traits on the communal and agentic dimension respectively were .95 and .96.

## Results

A full-factorial ANCOVA was conducted to examine whether the attribution of agentic and communal traits to beneficiaries of affirmative action policies (dependent variables) is related to gender, type of AA (independent variables), and perceived threat to men's access in decision-making positions (covariate variable). Attribution of agentic versus attribution of communal traits were included as within-participants variable, and participant's gender (coded -1 for women and +1 for men), type of AA (coded -1 for WPT and +1 for quotas) and perceived threat (centered continuous variable) were included as between-participants variables.

This analysis produced a marginally significant main effect of Type of AA,  $F(1, 229) = 3.11, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . In line with our predictions, results showed a significant Type of AA X Traits Attribution interaction,  $F(1, 229) = 52.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$  (Hypothesis 1), a significant Perceived Threat X Traits Attribution interaction,  $F(1, 229) = 8.25, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .04$ , and a significant Gender X Perceived Threat X Traits Attribution interaction,  $F(1, 229) = 4.19, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Even if the Hypothesis 2 was not supported (interaction Perceived Threat X Traits Attribution X Type of AA interaction was not significant),  $F(1, 229) = 1.84, p = .18, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ), the expected Gender X Type of AA X Perceived Threat X Traits Attribution interaction was significant,  $F(1, 229) = 6.22, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$  (Hypothesis 3). The tests of simple effects to decompose this interaction showed that the Type of AA X Perceived Threat X Traits Attribution interaction was not reliable among women,  $F(1, 229) = .58, p = .45, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , but was significant among men,  $F(1, 229) = 8.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . More specifically, men attributed more agentic traits ( $M = 6.22, SE = 0.19$ ) than communal traits ( $M = 5.11, SE = 0.20$ ) to the beneficiaries of the WPT,  $F(1, 229) = 22.22, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$ , regardless of their level of perceived threat,  $F(1, 229) = 0.33, p < .57, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . However, men's attribution of traits to the beneficiaries of quotas were contingent on their level of perceived threat. In line with our predictions, men who reported a high level of perceived threat (+1 *SD*) attributed more communal ( $M = 6.39, SE = 0.25$ ) than agentic traits ( $M = 4.63, SE = 0.23$ ) to the beneficiaries of quotas,  $F(1, 229) = 37.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$ . By contrast, among men who reported a low level of perceived threat (-1 *SD*), no significant difference was observed between the communal ( $M = 5.03, SE = 0.35$ ) and the agentic traits ( $M = 5.44, SE = 0.33$ ) attributed to quotas' beneficiaries,  $F(1, 229) = 1.02, p = .31, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant, all  $ps > .10$ .

## General Discussion

This study contributes to the understanding of the determinants of attitudes toward the beneficiaries of different types of AAP. While previous research has focused on the effects of AAPs on the perceived performance of beneficiaries, we provide new evidence showing that AAPs are also likely to trigger stereotypical gender representations. In light of the prevailing “think leader-think male” belief, these representation may render AAPs counterproductive. Study 1 showed that participants—in particular, women—perceived women in decision-making positions as more agentic than communal. Study 2 showed that women benefiting from quotas were perceived as more communal than agentic, while those benefiting from WPT were evaluated as more agentic than communal by both female and male participants. In what follows, we discuss these findings and their implications for the concrete implementation of affirmative action policies.

### **Affirmative action and gender stereotypes**

A comparison of the data obtained in the two studies revealed that women hired through AAPs tend to be considered as more communal than women hired through conventional hiring procedure (Schein, 2001). However, when it comes to the impact of AAPs on agentic traits of women in decision-making positions, our studies clearly show that the type of policy matters: Participants attributed more agentic traits to women hired through the WPT, compared to women hired through a quota policy or a conventional procedure.

When women are selected through WPT, their individual merit is directly compared with the one of male candidates, who usually set the benchmark. Female candidates featuring the same behavioral characteristics as men are expected to be more suitable for these positions; a woman needs to show to be “as good as a man”. Hence, her agentic traits are over-emphasized. Conversely, in the case of *quota* policies, group membership prevails over individual merit. Women are not in direct competition with men. They need to be “the best woman” in a pool of female candidates. Accordingly, agentic traits do not appear to be a

relevant attribute to select the best candidate under the quota condition. Moreover, quotas aim at providing a fair representation to a specific group, which implies that traits associated to that group are explicitly targeted and considered as necessary for the good functioning of the organization, making communal traits necessary.

### **Gender (counter-)stereotypes: a backlash against affirmative action?**

As leadership skills are usually associated with agentic traits (Schein, 2001), professional women often need to defeat or to downplay feminine stereotypes to be considered as qualified (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This should let us conclude that the WPT profiles its beneficiaries as suitable to hold leadership positions according to the mainstream criteria. However, the existing literature suggests that a backlash effect emerges when women are perceived as being highly agentic. This entails that counter-stereotypical female leaders are considered as less likeable, and are the target of prejudice (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Hence, we consider that by overstressing the candidates' agentic traits, WPT may sustain the backlash effect more than the conventional procedure. The latter does not put emphasis on gender, and therefore abstains from drafting men as role models.

Contrary to that, quota policies tend to enhance the perception of communal traits of beneficiaries. Even if gender diversity in management – and especially communal traits – are now granted to enhance the performance of these organizations (Ellemers, 2014), previous studies showed the “lack of fit” between communal traits and leadership requirements (Heilman, 1983). This leads us to conclude that the enhancement of stereotypical or counter-stereotypical gender traits may jeopardize the expected outcome of these policies. The discussion should not be limited to a quantitative representation of women. It should also stress the added value of having women in decision-making positions. AAPs should be included in a more comprehensive discussion on the expected outcome of the involvement of

women in decision-making positions on business performance and public welfare rather than limiting the discussion on the measurable output in terms of gender balance.

### **Quota women as a threat**

Our findings further show that quotas are likely to be judged as more threatening to the men's participation in decision-making positions than WPT. Consistent with our expectations, the relationship between perception of threat to men's participation in decision-making positions and the feminization of beneficiaries of quota was most apparent among men in the quota condition, even though the participant's gender did not directly predict perceived threat. This finding highlights the fact that members of dominant groups (here, men) may strategically emphasize intergroup differences (here, by attributing communal traits to women hired under quota) in threatening circumstances (when quota threaten their social standing). This is in line with previous research showing that members of high-status groups tend to essentialize lower-status outgroups when they are or feel to be under threat (Morton et al., 2009). Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), men, as members of the high-status group, use essentialist beliefs to consolidate and entrench the current hierarchy. Conversely, in comparison to quotas, the implementation of WPT, based on both individual merit and group membership, triggers fewer feelings of threat, which in turn do not encourage stereotypical beliefs about women benefiting from this policy. This suggests that WPT is not feared to exclude men from high decision-making positions.

The results show that the respondents' gender does not have an effect in the way beneficiaries of different affirmative action policies are perceived. Considered that leading positions are usually associated with agentic traits, it can be assumed that women perceive leadership skills in the same way as men do. They base their chances to access these positions by exacerbating agentic traits rather than communal traits. Hence, a 'quota woman' will be seen as a woman, who did not succeed in climbing the career ladder through conventional

procedures, possibly due to a mismatch between the gender role's requirements and her communal traits. These findings resonates with a growing body of research on the so-called 'Queen Bee' phenomenon whereby some female leaders have critical attitudes and distance themselves from junior women in order to overcome gender stereotypical expectations at work (Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & De Groot, 2011; Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016; Ellemers et al., 2012; Ellemers et al., 2004). Further, these women are reluctant to support gender quotas (Faniko, Ellemers, & Derks, in press; Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, in press).

### **Limitations and future research**

A limitation of the present research is that we did not assess the process that could explain why female participants attributed more communal traits to women hired under quotas compared to women hired under weak AAPs. Previous research showed that support of gender quotas targeting junior women is particularly weak among women who succeeded in climbing the organizational ladder in male-dominated organizations (Faniko et al., in press). Indeed, some women in decision-making positions may oppose AAPs as a response to social identity threat (for a review, see Ellemers et al., 2012). Women working in male-dominated organizations in which their gender identity – and the feature of communal traits – is perceived as devalued, will oppose any measure that would favor women as a group. Hence, they consider 'quota women' as more communal than women like them, that is, women who managed to succeed without AAPs. Future research should assess how the gender identity threat caused by gender quotas is related to attribution of agentic and communal traits to women beneficiaries. This may be particularly relevant in a post-communist society, as in our study, where patriarchal social structures prevail despite a long tradition of formal gender equality policies and the official ideology has long associated the emancipation of women with a dissociation from traditional gender roles. That being said, our

observations are likely to be relevant also to other European countries, where there is also a rather large asymmetry between a ‘politically correct’ official discourse on gender equality by the institutions, and an enduring stereotypization of gender roles at societal level.

A second limitation is the generalization of these findings. Gender quotas is on the policy agenda in many European countries, and the controversies are shaped differently by variations in historical, societal and political landscape (Heidenreich, 2012). However, there are some characteristics concerning gender that are recognizable in most debates on gender quotas; namely the perception of quota women replacing qualified men. Notably in Switzerland, this measure tends to be presented as an exogenous top-down political decision affecting the career path of women and men. Related studies showed that the mechanisms that explain opposition to AAPs are similar in Switzerland and Albania (Faniko, 2015; Faniko et al., in press). We can therefore assume that this process applies also to other country settings sharing the top-down framing of AAPs and further comparative studies could investigate how the observed mechanism is affected by the way AAPs are implemented.

Finally, this study did not consider how the particular organizational culture might affect how threat is perceived. Feelings of threat may be less prevalent in organizations, where diversity management is commonly accepted as a necessary condition for performance and where the staff feels a strong sense of ownership on the organization (Bjørkhaug & Sørensen, 2012). In organizations in which the *weak preferential treatment* is effectively implemented through a ‘top-down’ approach, and in which the equivalence of qualifications is interpreted according to the *in dubio pro femina* principle, men may feel more threatened and will assign communal traits to beneficiaries accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, the results of the present studies suggest that women in decision-making positions are perceived as more agentic than communal. However, these perceptions can be influenced by the nature of hiring procedure, namely the type of AA policy. Policies such as quotas emphasize group membership, and encourage an assessment of the beneficiaries in terms of stereotypical gender traits. Men, as members of the dominant group, emphasize intergroup differences and stereotype quota's beneficiaries due to the perceived threat to the leadership monopoly of their group. In a different way, this threat is less apparent when AAPs are designed in order to make sure that selected women are "as good as are men". As a part of a strategy to reduce the perception of threat posed to men's participation in decision-making positions by quota policies, policymakers could inform the public, especially men, of the criteria used to implement AAPs and benefits of such measures for organizations. A growing strand of empirical evidence shows that a stronger presence of communal traits has a positive effect on corporate performance. In such terms the traditional approach to gender equality based on fairness could give the lead to an alternative approach rooted in management efficiency. For instance, depicting quota as a policy that enhances organizational performance by diversifying the workforce could reduce the perception of threat and increase support for policy's beneficiaries.

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Figure 1. Attribution of communal and agentic traits as a function of type of affirmative action and perceived threat to men's participation in decision-making positions

