

# Increasing the Number of Women on Boards: The Role of Actors and Processes

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**Abstract** Understanding the spread of national public policies to increase the percentage of women on boards is often presented using different types of institutional theory logic. However, the importance of the political games influencing these decisions has not received the same attention. In this article, we look beyond the institutional setting by focusing on the role of actors. We explore processes that include who the critical actors that drive and determine these policies are, and what motivates them to push for change. We employ a processual design approach using a longitudinal country-comparative case study exploring the case of Norway, England, Germany and Italy. We map the political games, both inside and outside legislative areas, including the micro-politics among various actors and groups of actors in the selected countries. Data are collected through participation observations, interviews and text analyses. The study contributes by filling important gaps in the literature by embedding the discussion about women on boards in politicking and national public policies and by introducing dynamic perspectives. Finally, by using a processual design approach, we capture the

reality of the women on board debates at different points of time and in different actor and motivational contexts. The study has consequences for how policy-makers and businesses may follow up and act, based on the debates.

**Keywords** Women on boards (WoB) · National public policies · Quotas · Actors

## Introduction

Understanding the spread of national public policies to increase the percentage of women on boards (WoB) is often presented using different types of institutional theory logic. However, the importance of the political games influencing these decisions has not received the same attention. In this article, we look beyond the institutional setting by focusing on the role of actors.

Norway was the first country to introduce a gender-balance law with quota regulations for corporate boards. After the introduction of quotas in Norway, several other countries followed similar paths. A number of studies point to the importance of institutional factors in explaining both the spread of national public policy initiatives, including quotas (Terjesen et al. 2015) and the percentage of WoB (Terjesen and Singh 2008; Grosvold and Brammer 2011). While these studies demonstrate important contextual elements, they do not fully capture cross-country differences and politicking among key actors. In response, we address the puzzles surrounding introductions of national public policy initiatives for WoB through an investigation of actors, the dynamic relationships and interactions between actors, and their motivations in Norway, England, Germany and Italy. These countries are chosen based on several factors: they are all European countries potentially

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affected by EU regulations, they have different national public policies to increase the percentage of WoB in place, the institutional settings provide different contextual and historical settings and the research team had unique access and the necessary language skills to follow the developments in the selected countries.

The uses of national public policies have received increased attention in Europe and beyond over the last decade, and most countries have the lack of WoB on their political agendas. The European Union (EU) has recently entered the debate about how to increase WoB, with Vivian Reding threatening to introduce quotas if the number of WoB in Europe does not increase (Reding 2013). The EU has traditionally focused on gender equality in terms of gender mainstreaming and a soft approach (Walby 2004, p. 7). Consequently, the recent discussion regarding quotas on boards is a new shift in the EU's equality agenda. Nonetheless, the kinds of approaches and how to use them in order to increase WoB vary between countries.

Experiences from countries with national public policies to increase WoB already in place are heavily used to influence debates in other countries. Nevertheless, studies show different results regarding the consequences of introducing national public policy strategies to increase the percentage of WoB (Ahern and Dittmar 2012; Carrasco et al. 2015; Chapple and Humphrey 2014; Heidenreich 2010; Joecks et al. 2013; Perrault 2015; Sun et al. 2014). In this article, we will not make a case for or against the use of different policies; rather we will: (1) discuss key studies relating to the dynamic developments taking place to increase WoB, (2) identify the main actors pushing for change within the four countries of Norway, England, Germany and Italy, and (3) discuss the motivations, interactions and dynamic relationships between the main actors. Our argument is that this understanding will have consequences for how policy-makers and businesses may follow up and push for different public policy initiatives.

We build on a political science framework developed by Krook (2007) and research by sociologists (e.g. Kirton 2006; Teigen 2000) to map actors within four categories: civil society actors, business/corporate actors, state actors and international actors. Furthermore, in order to understand intra-country dynamics, we explore actors' motivations, interactions and how they work to influence change. To capture the contemporary picture and to investigate the dynamic state of the WoB landscape, we employ a processual design approach using a longitudinal country-comparative case study (Pettigrew 1997). We follow the national debates within Norway, England, Germany and Italy—closely analysing media coverage, political documents, academic research, political debates and laws/initiatives/codes. We also use qualitative data, building on

participant observation and semi-structured interviews with key actors within the different countries.

Through the analysis, we make several important contributions. In particular, the study contributes by filling important gaps in the literature by embedding the discussion about WoB in politicking and national public policies, and by introducing dynamic perspectives. The theoretical framework used in this study is novel. We employed and adapted Krook's (2007) framework originally designed for politics. This framework contributes to understanding the different actors pushing for change within the countries, their motivations and interactions, and the overall country discourses about women on boards and the use of strategies. By doing so, we present and challenge the WoB literature which has until now been dominated by descriptive studies focusing on institutional factors for explaining the percentage of WoB and the use of public policy strategies. In particular, we argue that the politicking and the political games influencing actors pushing for change may be more important than the institutional setting in explaining the use of public policy strategies. In addition, this study responds to calls within WoB and corporate governance literature, highlighting the need for more interpretive and innovative research going beyond descriptive cross-sectional studies. An innovative research approach focusing on processes was applied (Pye and Pettigrew 2005; Pettigrew 1997). By having a processual design approach using a longitudinal country-comparative case study, we demonstrate that the international landscape of national public policies to increase WoB is fast changing, and that there is a need to recognise that this is dynamic. As a result, to make sense of the spread of policies to increase the percentage of WoB, there is a need to take a holistic approach. By using a processual design approach, we capture the reality of the WoB debates at different points in time, and in different actor and motivational contexts. This may help guide policy-makers and businesses on how to follow up and act in the different contextual settings.

This article is organised as follows. Firstly, we present the background and the theoretical frameworks. We challenge existing research about WoB, including work that uses institutional theories to explain the spread of national public policies to increase the share of WoB, and we propose an actor-centred approach. Secondly, we present the research design and methods of this current study. There we present the processual analysis design and the cross-country-comparative method, the data collection, our data analyses choices and the four countries we have in our sample. Thirdly, we present our analyses with findings. We identify core actors and analyse their motivations and interactions within each country and across the four countries. Finally, our discussion and conclusions are presented.

## Background and Theoretical Frameworks

The topic of WoB has received increased attention within the academic community over the last few decades (De Anca and Gabaldon 2014; Huse and Solberg 2006; Post and Byron 2015; Seierstad and Opsahl 2011; Torchia et al. 2011). Below, we discuss the development of WoB research with focus on the effects of using public policy strategies to increase women's presence on boards. In particular, research using institutional theory to understand WoB is presented. In addition, actor-centred research and theories from political science and sociology are discussed by way of demonstrating a rationale for adopting this focus/framework on WoB.

### The Development of Women on Boards Studies

Women's positions on corporate boards are a central topic in the literature concerning business ethics, corporate governance and women in leadership (Bear et al. 2010; Burgess and Tharenou 2002; Burke 1997). Hence, a variety of research traditions and theoretical approaches exists that investigate the topic of WoB. In their comprehensive review, Terjesen et al. (2009) look at a range of theoretical perspectives focusing on WoB with a micro, meso or macro perspective. Through their analysis of over 400 publications, they argue that few papers address theoretical developments, and that the majority of studies focus on readily available empirical data. Indeed, research on WoB often focuses on the performance effects of having WoB, either positive or negative, in relation to return on investments, productivity and share value (Chapple and Humphrey 2014; Joecks et al. 2013; Post and Byron 2015).

Moreover, research on WoB often focuses on the differences between men and women directors. In particular, studies conclude with differences in terms of independence status, educational background and qualifications, and age. Several studies indicate that women directors, more often than men, are the independent directors (Adams and Ferreira 2009; Huse 2011). Furthermore, studies from several countries find that women directors are younger than their male counterparts (Heidenreich 2010; Peterson and Philpot 2007; Sealy et al. 2008) and better educated (Heidenreich 2010; Singh et al. 2008).

Another important stream of research explores the number of WoB and developments in terms of diversity on boards, both nationally (Hoel 2008; Sealy and Vinnicombe 2012) and internationally (Catalyst 2014). This type of research has been popular among academic institutions, such as Cranfield, as well as among consultancy firms, such as Deloitte and McKinsey, and among organisations such as Catalyst. An increasingly popular area of international WoB studies explores the effect of using public policy

initiatives, such as quotas and voluntary codes, in order to increase gender diversity on boards (De Vos and Culliford 2014). In particular, several studies focus on the introduction of the gender-balance law in Norway, as this is the only country where the law is fully implemented (Heidenreich 2010; Huse 2011; Seierstad and Opsahl 2011; Wang and Kelan 2013; Teigen 2015). Seierstad and Opsahl (2011) found that after the end of the implementation period, Norwegian boards complied with the law, and the share of WoB increased to approximately 40 %. Nevertheless, they found that the share of WoB did not change significantly during the implementation period and highlighted this as an important area for further research. In response, Wang and Kelan (2013) found an increase in the percentage of WoB as well as in the percentage of women in CEO positions in a selection of Norwegian Public Limited Companies (PLCs). In addition, Seierstad and Opsahl (2011) found that more women than men have multiple directorships. In response, Huse (2011) further investigated who these women are and how they were recruited, pointing to diversity beyond gender among the women directors. Studies using a human capital approach such as that by Heidenreich (2010) indicate that women board directors in Norway in the post-quota period are better educated than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, they are recruited in the same way through professional networks. In addition, one of the most-cited studies looking at the effects of the gender-balance law in Norway points to the immediate negative effect of the legislation on market values for the affected companies (Ahern and Dittmar 2012). Moreover, Bøhren and Staubo (2014) conclude that a large proportion of Norwegian PLCs exited to another corporate form, and thus avoided legal requirements such as the gender-balance requirements. Nevertheless, a study by Heidenreich and Storvik (2010) found that among the PLCs that changed their organisational form, only 6 % identified the gender-balance law as the primary reason for changing incorporation form. As other countries are following paths similar to Norway, lessons from the Norwegian example are often used in the international debate about national public policy initiatives.

### Institutional Theories and Women on Boards

As a research approach, grouping countries according to similarities in order to understand the relationship between state, market and family has been carried out by several authors (e.g. Chang 2000; Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999, 2002; Hall and Soskice 2001). Although a precedent exists for using national institutional settings to look at varieties of capitalism, different business systems, welfare approaches, patterns of occupational sex segregation and the situation of women in society, it is apparent that this research

tradition has not been adopted in research into WoB. In fact, despite increased focus on WoB, the relationship between national contexts and WoB was until recent years an under-researched area (Terjesen and Singh 2008). In response, Grosvold and Brammer's (2011) comprehensive study explores the link between national institutional systems and the proportion of WoB. They argue that international variations in country-level institutions are crucial for understanding the situation for WoB globally. By combining what they consider the five most-cited systems of national institutions (national economic systems, national business systems, legal systems, governance systems and national culture), they look at cross-national patterns of WoB and relationships among them. By doing so, Grosvold and Brammer (2011) demonstrate the importance of national institutional systems, and they argue that as much as half of the variation of WoB is explained by the national institutional systems. However, they do not focus on public policy strategies in depth. Although several countries have followed Norway's path of having a gender-balance law, surprisingly few studies have investigated the relations between national institutional factors and the use of national public policy initiatives.

As a response, Teigen (2012) investigates how various countries are using different public policy initiatives to increase WoB. Building on diffusion theory in order to understand the complexity of factors influencing public debates and legal reforms, she addresses why the policy of using radical strategies to increase WoB has spread. In particular, she points to the "complexities of factors that have led to the diffusion of public debate and legal reform of corporate board quota" (Teigen 2012, p. 115). Later, Terjesen et al. (2015) also explore the development of such strategies to increase WoB and argue that three key institutional factors (the female labour market and gendered welfare-state provisions, left-leaning political government coalitions and path-dependent policy initiatives for gender equality) will affect the development of such public policy strategies in the future. Hence, Terjesen et al. (2015) provide an institutional framework for understanding the spread of gender quotas globally. An interesting study that questions the logic of gender-quota developments looking beyond the immediate institutional dimensions is that of Heidenreich (2012). Her focus is on the Norwegian and Swedish national public policy initiative of WoB. In particular, she questioned why Norway, but not Sweden, introduced gender representation regulations—two countries with similar national institutional contexts and gender regimes. She found that despite similarities between these countries related to wealth, welfare systems and high levels of equality values, there are clear differences going beyond the immediate macro setting. In particular, she found that there are differences in terms of acceptance of state intervention, feminist/

equality discourse in society, the role and position of the business community and the business sector's relationship to the state, including the role of state ownership. Hence, she points to the importance of looking at specific national institutional factors beyond what is often done in comparative studies of WoB and national institutional theories.

### **The Importance of Processes and Individual Actors Pushing for National Public Policies**

As discussed above, the WoB literature recently started paying attention to the importance of institutional/contextual settings in order to explain the numbers of WoB (Terjesen and Singh 2008; Grosvold and Brammer 2011) and the use of public policy initiatives such as quotas (Terjesen et al. 2015). However, the critical role of actors pushing for change has not received the same attention in the WoB literature. Research on the use of public policy initiatives in other areas of the labour market points to different kinds of rationales in use for supporting such strategies (Krook 2003, 2007; Teigen 2000). These often range from justice (individual and social), to utility lines of argument (Seierstad forthcoming; Teigen 2000). Individual-justice lines of arguments have a focus on the individual and on prevention and compensation for barriers (Reskin 1998), while the social-justice viewpoint is based on the key underlying principle of that of an equal society. Utility justifications focus on the benefits of affirmative action, drawing in part on notions of human capital and the business case for equality (Seierstad forthcoming).

In terms of research on employment relations (Glover and Kirton 2006), women's situation in the labour market (Bradley 2007) and the use of quotas in politics (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2007), the importance of actors is highly acknowledged. Research on occupational gender segregation points to the importance of actors, such as trade unions, suffragist organisations and other interest groups, pushing for change to increase women's power and influence (Dickson 1997; Glover and Kirton 2006). Research on the use of public policy strategies and women's situation in politics has received increased attention globally, as more and more countries have introduced initiatives such as legislated candidate quotas, reserved seats and voluntary political party quotas (Dahlerup 1998, 2006; Freidenvall et al. 2006; Hernes 1987; Krook 2007; Phillips 1995; Skjeie 1992). The importance of different types of actors pushing for these changes is acknowledged within the literature and, building on the work of Krook, Freidenvall (2003, p. 8) takes the position that "actors and structures operate at distinct and independent levels, but are implicitly interwoven since each incorporates the capacity to promote both continuity and change". Krook (2007) provides a framework for analysing and comparing the actors,



their motivations, and contexts at work in specific quota reforms in politics. She argues that there is a need for a comparative framework as the majority of research explores single cases, reflecting little awareness of developments in other countries. Krook (2007, p. 369) consequently aims to “map the universe of actors, motivations and contexts that influence quota adoption and implementation across various cases in a political setting”. Krook (2007) further presents four common stories explaining why and how quotas in politics are adopted. These are

1. Women mobilise for quotas to increase women’s representation.
2. Political elites recognise strategic advantages for pursuing quotas.
3. Quotas are consistent with existing or emerging notions of equality and representation.
4. Quotas are supported by international norms and spread through transnational sharing.

Moreover, Krook (2007) identifies three key types of actors potentially involved in quota campaigns: firstly, civil society actors—a group that can include grassroots women’s movements, women’s sections inside political parties, cross-partisan networks of female politicians, and individual women active inside and outside political parties. Secondly, state actors—a group that includes especially national leaders, governing coalitions, representatives in parliaments, political party leaders and judges. Thirdly, international and transnational actors—including international organisations, NGOs, and international networks of activists, politicians and scholars. Finally, Krook (2007) identifies a variety of motivational factors in campaigns for gender quotas in a political setting. These include principled stands, electoral considerations, empty gestures, promotion of other political ends, extensions of representational guarantees, international pressure and transnational learning.

While Krook’s (2007) framework is tailored to look at the use of quotas in the political setting, we take the position that the framework provides an interesting starting point for looking at the use of different national public policy initiatives for WoB as well. Moreover, as our research question is about corporate boards and the business sector, we expect that actors from the corporate/business sector will be active. We thus include business/corporate as a fourth category in addition to civil society, state and international/transnational actors as used by Krook (2007).

In conclusion, it is clear from the above discussion of the extant literature that WoB as a research field has experienced increased attention over the last few years. Yet, only recent WoB publications have usefully put focus on the importance of understanding institutional factors to explain country variations in gender-equality issues. Most

research on boards of directors is static (Gabrielsson and Huse 2004). This is also the case for research on WoB as revealed in the review by Terjesen et al. (2009). Limited research has focused on processes and the understanding of individual actors and groups of actors with regard to the spread of national public policies for WoB. Our research objective is therefore dynamic, and it aims to capture what determines national public policy initiatives to increase WoB. We look beyond the institutional setting to focus on processes, and we explore who the critical actors that drive and determine these policies are and what motivates them to push for change. The objective is to fill important gaps in existing knowledge by embedding the discussion about women on boards within politicking, national public policies and the introduction of dynamic perspectives.

## Research Design and Methods

In this section we present our research design, including our choice of methods, samples and analyses. We also present the four countries chosen for our longitudinal country-comparative case study: Norway, England, Germany and Italy.

To meet our objectives, we employ a processual analysis design using a longitudinal country-comparative case and thereby respond to calls for interpretive work in corporate governance and WoB research that goes beyond descriptive studies (McNulty et al. 2013; Terjesen et al. 2009; Zattoni et al. 2013; Adams et al. 2015). The overriding aim of processual analysis is to “catch the reality in flight” (Pettigrew 1997, p. 339). This research design captures the development of the WoB debate, and it also helps us to understand the context of key actors and their interactions. The distinctive understanding of a processual analysis approach (Pettigrew 1997) builds on the idea that any social reality studied over time—such as in this study of developments in WoB—is never a steady state but is a dynamic process (Pye and Pettigrew 2005). Hence, the dynamics of becoming, emerging, developing and transforming the WoB landscape over time is explored in the rich, longitudinal qualitative data.

A case-study method can be a preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being asked, when investigators have little or no control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary set of events within some real-life context (Yin 2003). We thus decided to employ a country-comparative case-study approach as our aim is to capture unique cross-country differences in understanding the development of WoB and differences in relation to politicking.

We used data drawn from primary and secondary sources collected from the four country cases in participant observation, semi-structured interviews and text analysis

(of official, political and media documents) in order to capture unique country-specific data.

## Data Collection

The data collection took place in Norway, England, Germany and Italy during the period 2000–2014. In order to capture developments, in line with the ideas of a processual analysis approach, our study involved following different countries over time. The selection of the four countries is based on several factors. Firstly, they are all European countries potentially affected by EU regulations. Secondly, they all exemplify different approaches to the use of national public policy initiatives to increase WoB. Thirdly, their institutional settings provide different examples of key institutional factors that may colour these individual societal landscapes. In particular, the selected countries represent different types of welfare regime typologies (i.e. social democratic, conservative and liberal) and examples of varieties of capitalism (i.e. liberal market and coordinate market economy) (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001). Finally, we were able to put together a research team that had unique direct access to data and possessed the necessary language skills, which allowed us to follow developments in each of these four countries.

Three main data collecting methods were applied. Data collection included the use of participant observations, semi-structured interviews and text analyses (of political and media debates) in the local language.

Participant observations were performed by attending meetings (e.g. political, network, association, union, business and academic) organised around the topic of WoB and women in leadership. Our roles included being participants as well as giving talks and presentations. We also followed key actors in each country. These actors were followed in their work and through discussions and interviews. A similar number of interviews were conducted in each country, and we interviewed politicians and policy-makers, women from business, women from trade unions, researchers and other informants in all four countries.

A nesting technique was used when selecting actors to follow in the study. Contacts with local universities and local scholars were the starting points. The active presence in each country led us to core actors, who again led us into their networks. The amount of time spent together with each of the core actors varied, and we found in the process that some actors were more successful in their approaches than others. We were able to get to know and follow at least one core actor in each country who was able to introduce us to the political and business arenas. Success criteria included presentations at the national parliaments (England and Italy) and consulting for core politicians (Norway and Germany). The business arenas included

businesses, business associations and associations for women on boards. The involvement in Norway started before 2000, in Italy in 2001, in England in 2007 and in Germany in 2009. The core actors included us in their actions, motivations and interactions with others.

All interviewees gave permission for the data to be recorded, and anonymity has been guaranteed in the archival data. The interview schedule adopted in this study was designed to focus on specific themes. Through a review of the literature, policy documents, media debates and national and international data, the following themes were identified for this study: “public policy initiatives”, “quotas”, “women on boards”, “women in leadership”, “equality”, “diversity”, “utility arguments” and “justice arguments”. Specific questions were asked with regard to the different themes, but the interviews had a highly reflexive and flexible approach which allowed interviewers to adapt, change, include and develop questions that emerged as the interview went along, while still retaining the key themes (Robson 2002, p. 270). Moreover, in line with our idea of a processual approach making sense of a dynamic process, the interview schedule was more of a starting point for discussion than a fixed approach. In addition, research diaries, videotaping and tape recording were used to collect supplementary information in terms of both participant information and interviews. The semi-structured interviews, the notes from the participant observations, and the research diaries were transcribed.

Public media debates were closely followed for additional data. In particular, database searches in relevant newspaper databases for the period 2003–2014 using keywords such as “women AND boards”, “national public policy” and “quota” (and their translations in Norwegian, German, and Italian) were included in the analyses.

## Data Analysis

Each member of the research team was involved in the process of analysing the national documentation. This included text analysis of the media coverage and political documents, with back-to-back translations used where necessary. Cross comparisons of data and appropriate data analyses were carried out by the research team at annual/bi-annual think-tank seminars during the study period to ensure conformity of data collection and data analyses. The benefit of the annual/bi-annual think-tank seminars throughout the research period is related to the fact that we had the opportunity to have a dynamic and flexible approach to the four country cases. We could thus capture developments and changes in the national rhetoric, both from the political arena as well as from the media and other sources.

We used Krook’s (2007) framework to guide our sorting logic and analysis. We started by identifying core actors in

each country before we analysed their motivations and interaction. Finally, we compared the findings across the four countries. Core actors were categorised as civil society actors, business/corporate actors, state actors, and international and transnational actors. This is an extension of Krook's framework since business/corporate actors were not in focus in her studies.

The data were first loosely analysed based on the following themes: "national public policy actions", "quotas", "women on boards", "actors", "motivational factors", "individual justice rationale", "social justice rationale", "utility rationale", "self-interest" and "international pressure". After the first initial thematic analysis based on the broad areas identified from the literature review and text analysis, the different themes were then coded in a hierarchical manner. An example is the theme "utility rationale" which was one of the original themes. This was further coded into "societal utility", "business utility" and "individual utility". Emerging themes were also identified within the data and coded accordingly. Quotations from the interviews are used when presenting some of the key qualitative data. In line with traditions within qualitative research, careful consideration is given in order to protect participants' identity. To preserve the anonymity of the quotes, we will refer to the actor group identification, not the individual characteristics of the respondents.

Following the thematic analyses, which also incorporated the emerging themes, we further explored the micro-politics and dynamics within each country case, looking at interactions among the key actors. Developments and changes in terms of motivations and interactions among actors were also incorporated. In particular, an actor-network-based sorting logic (Callon 1986; Latour 1987; Walsham 1997) was applied at the qualitative data analysis stage of actor relationships in order to map connections between the civil society actors, business/corporate actors, state actors and international/transnational actors in the study. As a material semiotic method, it maps relations found between concepts in a study, such as people, artefacts, institutions and organisations; it is a unique approach, connecting social relations, including power (Law 1992). All members of the research team were involved in these levels of analysis.

### The Country Cases—Norway, England, Germany and Italy

As discussed earlier, several factors were important for selecting Norway, England, Germany and Italy to this country-comparative case study. In order to make sense of developments taking place and to understand the settings in which the different actors operate, we will present some of these important historical, contextual and institutional

differences among the four countries. We argue that the contextual setting has changed and evolved over the last few years, highlighting the importance of treating the contextual setting as potentially fluid and changing.

A description of corporate governance in Norway may be found in Rasmussen and Huse (2011). Norway is consistently ranked among the most gender-equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum 2013) and is often put forward to demonstrate the successful use of policies that promote equality between the sexes (Nordic Council of Ministers 2007). Yet, despite Norway's position as a gender-equal country, strong patterns of occupational segregation have been present in the labour market. A wide range of policies, both in terms of equality of access (such as equal-opportunity strategies, including quotas) and substantive benefits (such as welfare) have been in place for decades. Quotas as a strategy for creating gender balance are used in areas of the labour market, politics and educational system (Teigen 2012). In Norway, several initiatives for increasing WoB have been implemented for decades (e.g. mentorship programmes, formal education in business, seminars on boards, etc.). However, no evident change took place, which yielded the need for more radical measures (Machold et al. 2013). When the law was proposed in 2003, the private sector in Norway was given the option of voluntarily increasing WoB by 2005 and, if this happened, the gender-balance law proposal presented in 2003 would be withdrawn (Machold et al. 2013). The proposed voluntary approach did not lead to significant changes, and thus there was a need for regulation with sanctions for non-compliance. Consequently, the law came into effect in 2006 with a two-year implementation period. By the end of the implementation period, January 2008, about 40 % of board members in Norwegian public limited companies (PLCs) were women. The law was a result of cooperation between the Ministry of Equality and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. It had broad political support when introduced, though the law was heavily debated before the introduction. This fact is important, as despite Norway's reputation as a gender-equal country, the use of gender quotas within the private sector in Norway was controversial and debated. In particular, strong and conflicting opinions from the media, some areas of politics and the private sector challenged Norway's image as a country of gender equality (Seierstad forthcoming). Nevertheless, once the law was introduced in Norway, this negative focus decreased, and the law is widely accepted today.

A presentation of corporate governance in England may be found in Mallin (2011). Globally, England is ranked as the 18th most gender-equal country in the world, below most western countries (World Economic Forum 2013). England is characterised by having a liberal welfare approach, and the country has little tradition of using quotas. In politics, two political parties operate with voluntary

measures in the form of “women’s lists”, but the word “quota” is rarely mentioned, indicating scepticism to the use of quotas in England. In England, the use of quotas is not a highly regarded strategy, and there have been heated national debates about WoB and the use of national public policies. Presentations of English WoB history and background can be found in, for example, Sealy et al. (2008) and Sealy and Vinnicombe (2013). The international debate on WoB and quotas pushed for a response from England, which resulted in the Lord Davies Report (2011). The report suggests a voluntary approach in which the FTSE 100 companies should aim for 25 % of women directors by 2015 (Lord Davies Report 2011). Moreover, the report encourages companies to publish their targets, focusing on openness and transparency. However, the report concludes with the following statement: “The Government must reserve the right to introduce more prescriptive alternatives if the recommended business-led approach does not achieve significant change” (Lord Davies Report 2011, p. 2). In 2011 when the report was published, the percentage of WoB was 12.5 %. In terms of progress on the targets set in the Lord Davies Report per March 2014, the proportion of WoB had risen to 20.7 %, which indicates that the Lord Davies Report may have led to changes in the boardroom in England (Vinnicombe et al. 2014).

The German corporate governance background may be found in von Werder and Talaulicar (2011). In terms of gender equality, Germany is ranked as the 14th most gender-equal country in the world, which although higher than both Italy and England is significantly lower than Norway (World Economic Forum 2013). Germany is traditionally seen as having a conservative welfare approach. Although some political parties in German politics operate with quotas, these are only voluntary measures. In particular, quotas are not a common or accepted tool in the labour market; hence, the initial reluctance to implement quotas on boards can to a certain extent be expected in the context of the historical use of equality strategies and historical, contextual and institutional factors. Germany’s political response to the international debate about WoB came later than in England, Italy and several other European countries. Presentations of the German situation are found in Schulz-Strelow (2013) and Weber-Rey (2013). In the German Corporate Governance Codex, there is a suggestion that companies should increase diversity. Additionally, the former government and a leading trade association introduced a self-commitment plan with the aim of promoting more women to leading positions in business. This voluntary encouragement had some effect, as the proportion of women on German boards rose from 10 % in 2003 to 13 % in 2008, and 21 % in 2013. In 2011, heated discussions started about whether or not Germany should respond to the lack of WoB by introducing quotas.

The controversy of quotas in Germany is characterised by strong political disagreement. While the former Minister of Social Affairs demanded a fixed quota law, the former Minister of Family Affairs sought to introduce a flexible quota resting on a company’s individual, voluntary commitments. The first attempt to introduce a quota law was rejected in the German Bundestag in April 2013, and the political climate did not change until federal elections in the fall of 2013. With the change of political parties in power, the newly formed coalition agreed on a law to ensure that 30 % of supervisory board positions are held by women from 2016. The law applies to listed companies that have employee representation on their supervisory boards, affecting 120 companies in all. A further 3,500 medium-sized companies would have to determine their own quotas for executive and supervisory board seats. As a first step to the introduction of a quota law, the government presented a draft in March 2014. The proposal was agreed in November 2014. The political debates about the use of quotas in Germany were very much in the shadow of the EU’s “threat of quotas”.

A description of corporate governance in Italy may be found in Melis and Gaia (2011). In comparison with Norway, Italy is not perceived as a gender-egalitarian society. Looking at gender rankings, it is clear that in a European comparison, Italy is one of the least gender-egalitarian societies, ranked 71st in the world (World Economic Forum 2013). Italy has a conservative welfare approach, and women’s participation in the labour market is relatively low. Moreover, the use of gender quotas in Italy has been modest, with only some voluntary measures in politics where women’s right to vote was introduced as late as in 1946. Italy introduced gender quotas on boards in 2011. Descriptions of the Italian background concerning the WoB issue may be found in Amidami (2012), Brogi (2013) and Finnochi Mahne (2013). The Italian law came into effect in August 2012. The law requires that by 2015 women must hold at least one-third of board positions in companies listed on the Italian Stock Exchange (Golfo-Mosca Law 2011). Italian companies have less than three years to comply with the law. Regulations related to yearly performance are also stated, with a target that women hold 20 % of board positions within the first year. Currently, Italy seems to be failing to meet the first target, as women hold only around 8 % of board positions (European Commission 2013).

## Findings

Krook’s (2007) framework was, as previously indicated, adapted and used as our sorting logic to explore the role of actors in determining national public policies for increasing



the share of WoB. Firstly, we identify the key actors working to increase the proportion of WoB in the four countries. We extended Krook's (2007) categories of actors so that it included: (1) civil society, (2) business/corporate, (3) state and (4) international or transnational actors. Secondly, we present our analyses of the motivations and interactions of the actors. In our analyses, we build on lessons from previous actor-network analyses. Finally, we make comparisons across the four countries.

### The Key Actors

By investigating political debate, media debates, official documents and academic work, and through interviews and participant observation within the four countries, we observed that although there are some similarities in terms of actors, there are also great variations. These similarities and variations are shown in Table 1. In the text below we will only comment on the most interesting findings.

Firstly, it is clear that in terms of civil society actors, we identify individual politicians, mainly women, as important actors pushing and lobbying for change in all the countries. In addition, we observe that women in management, though at different stages in time and having different backgrounds and different motivational values, are also important actors in all four countries. In Norway, Germany and Italy, civil society actors have not only been working to increase the share of WoB, and they have also openly supported quotas. In England, on the other hand, we have seen that even though these actors have been supportive of national public policies, they have indicated scepticism towards quotas as a strategy. Nevertheless, we have recently seen some development in England in terms of the debate on quotas among actors at the civil society level. We observed how, over the last years in particular, civil society actors seem more inclined to at least take part in debate on quotas. We also observed that researchers have played important roles and can be seen as key actors in all countries but with some variations. In the cases of Norway and Germany, we found researchers supporting and making a case for quotas, while in England, the role of researchers has been more that of increasing visibility on the topic of WoB and on the lack of women in senior positions. In terms of the role of researchers in Italy, we observed that they provide a different kind of perspective, more by way of positioning the case of Italy in a comparative setting than by way of making a case for or against national public policies. In all countries we find "opportunistic"<sup>1</sup> researchers trying to maximise their influence on the

topical issue of WoB, but we do not see them as important actors in the process of determining national public policies.

There are also differences among the key actors at the civil society level. We observed that one key difference is the role of men as actors. In the case of Norway, we find examples of both male politicians and directors who were openly supporting quotas at an early stage, which has been highly important for the acceptance and successful implementation of quotas. This has not been the case in the other three countries to the same extent. There, the roles of men have been more modest.

Our observations of the business/corporate actors indicate a number of unique country differences. In Norway, actors pushing for change in the business sector are identified as business associations, such as Innovation Norway and NHO (Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise), together with associations of directors. Nevertheless, the role of these actors has been to work to increase the share of WoB rather than pushing for a quota strategy. The business/corporate-sector actor landscape in England is characterised by organisations such as the 30 % Club and employers' associations, together with large auditing/consulting companies working for change in terms of WoB. Interestingly, while the focus was on increasing the share of WoB, these actors opted for setting specific targets at the individual organisational level, and quotas from the national level were not on their agenda. Furthermore, in Germany, the business/corporate actors pushing for change are again country specific, with the German Corporate Governance Codex, WoB associations, women's professional networks and German subsidiaries of multinational enterprises (MNEs) playing key roles. Again, we observed that while there was a key focus on increasing WoB, quotas were not originally seen as the ideal strategy from actors at this level. A uniqueness found in the Italian data on the other hand is the presence of "board-ready women" (BRW), cooperative movements and board governance consultancy companies playing key roles in the business sector in lobbying for change. In the case of Italy, some of the business/corporate actors, such as BRW, were pushing for quotas as a means to increase WoB from an early stage.

Turning to the level of state actors, we also identified significant differences between the countries. In the case of Norway, we observed that several state actors have been among the most important actors. This included political leaders, political parties and civil servants. These groups have openly supported quotas. In England, which opted for a soft voluntary approach, we did not observe any clear visible state actors in the public domain. Nevertheless, we observed that politicians, particularly political leadership from the state level, have in England acted as "the invisible hand", very much placing the topic of WoB on the agenda

<sup>1</sup> We define opportunistic researchers as researchers who are more interested in maximising their own output rather than contributing to the discipline, impact or policy-driven changes.

**Table 1** Different types of actors

	Civil society actors	Business/corporate actors	State actors	International and transnational actors
Norway	Individual Women Politicians Individual Cabinet Members (men and women) Individual Civil Servants Senior WoB Researchers Sociologists Women's Networks Women Directors/Managers Male Directors/Managers	Organisations of Board-ready Women Business Associations –NHO –Innovation Norway Employers' Associations Associations of Directors Consultants/Headhunters	Political Leaders Political Parties Civil Servants State Agencies	Swedish Business and Public Debates
England	Individual Women Politicians Ex-Politicians (men and women) Individual Civil Servants Senior WoB Researchers Women Directors/Managers Trade Unions Women Business/Professional Networks Individual Business Leaders Media: Individual Journalists	Employers' Associations Associations of Directors WoB Associations 30 % Club Individual Businesses/Corporations Big Auditing/Consultancy Firms	Political Leaders (invisible hands) Lord Davies Report	EU/International Political Pressure The Norwegian Experience International Research/Researchers International Consultants/Associations International women's network
Germany	Individual Women Politicians Senior WoB Researchers Sociologists Women Directors/Managers Trade Unions Interest Groups (e.g. women lawyers) Trade Unions' Foundations Media: Individual Journalists	WoB Associations Women Business/Professional Networks Individual Businesses/Corporations German Subsidiaries of MNC German CG Codex	Political Parties Civil Servants	EU/International Political Pressure The Norwegian Experience International Research/Researchers International women's network
Italy	Individual Women Politicians Individual Women Academics Individual Women in Business Researchers Women's Networks Foundations Interest Groups/Associations Media: Individual Journalists	Board-ready Women Business Networks Cooperative Movements Board Governance Consultancy Companies	–	The Norwegian Experience International Research/Researchers International Consultants/Associations

and proposing what eventually became known as the Lord Davies Report at a relatively early stage. Hence, political leaders have been important, though more behind the scenes than in the case of Norway. Moreover, focus has been more on creating visibility than pushing for quotas. In Germany, political parties have now become the most important actors, but these state actors became active at a later stage than such actors in other countries. We observed that political parties became key actors when Germany had to react to international pressure, and this started as late as

in 2011. We observed that they were supported by civil servants. In Italy, we did not identify any clear state actors. We observed that the case of Italy was characterised by individual civil society actors (including individual politicians at senior level), mainly pushing the law through the system without much political or public debate at state level.

Finally, our findings regarding international and transnational actors, depicted in Table 1, indicate significant country variations. In the case of Norway, the

discussion in the 1990s of quotas for Swedish boards pushed the debate forward. Hence, the only key actor at this level identified within the Norwegian context was the Swedish debate. We found that for England, Italy and Germany, there were several similarities in the key international and transnational actors. In particular, we found that the researchers, the Norwegian experience and the international focus/debate were important drives, and thereby actors in all three countries. In addition, we found that the EU can be seen as a key actor, contributing to political debates on potential regulations for European countries. This was particularly visible in the case of Germany and England. Nevertheless, we observed that EU initiatives have probably influenced Germany's recent regulation more than England's response to date. We also observed how international women's networks have been important in both Germany and England. In the case of Italy and Norway, the quota laws existed before the EU entered the debate on WoB, and the EU was thus not an important actor in these two countries. Moreover, we observed that although international women's networks were present, the role of these actors was modest in terms of determining national public policy initiatives.

Despite similarities, we have seen that the sets of actors in each category and country vary. After having identified the actors, we continued by analysing their motivations and interactions.

### The Actors' Interactions and Motivations

Our objective has been to capture the underlying dynamics and politicking that influence countries' national public policy initiatives to increase the share of WoB. In particular, building on actor-network sorting logic, we focus on the links and interactions between the actors and groups of actors in each country and how they exert influence. A description of actor interactions within the four countries is found in the network analysis diagram forms in Appendix 1 to 4, and the interactions of the key actors are further discussed in the specific country analysis below. Moreover, we comment on the observed motivational factors and rationales for involvement among the key actors building on the work of Krook (2007) and Teigen (2000) (see Appendix 5 for a presentation of actors' motivational factors).

#### *Norway: Motivations and Interactions*

In the case of Norway (Appendix 1), we observed that key interactions were among various civil society and state actors, and to a lesser extent among business/corporate actors. The process in Norway started with individual women politicians and individual civil servants working together. We found that both these groups of actors used

arguments based on the political notions of equality and representation embedded in the Norwegian society and political ideology in rationalising their involvement. This is illustrated in the quote by one of the most important civil society actors involved in the process.

For me it was a democratic problem that we as a gender 'equal' society were lagging behind in this area—that women were excluded from the business world!

Several political parties and male and female directors/managers later supported this initial initiative. Although some justice rationales—from both the individual and social dimension—were found among these actors, they were mainly rationalising their involvement based on utility logic and the business case for WoB. This is illustrated in the following quote from one of the civil society actors, building on a utility line of argument supported by human capital logic.

You can't interfere in the private sector unless you really think this will improve the industry. But, I also believe this will have long term benefits for the country, to take better advantage of the human resources we have.

An important factor highlighted in the quote above is how the utility logic is stretched beyond the immediate setting. In the case of Norway, we observed that several actors and groups of actors used utility logic to rationalise their involvement focusing on the immediate business setting, as well as the wider interest for society. Similar logic was used by organisations of board-ready women (BRW) who eventually worked closely with both politicians and researcher in terms of influencing the debate.

In terms of rationalising not only support of WoB but also the use of quotas as a tool, we also observed that groups of actors, including politicians, political parties, political leaders, women directors and organisations of BRW, used the Norwegian experience with quotas in politics as an argument for implementing quotas on boards. In particular, they rationalised this by referring to how women as role models in politics had been important for women's high representation in the political sphere. Statements, such as the one below from a cabinet member, were presented by other actors at different levels.

We have seen that it works in politics. The majority of the political party leaders are now women, even from the parties that do not operate with quotas. The fact that we have changed the image of a politician is the reason we have so many women in politics.

Interestingly, we found among several groups of actors, in particular among women directors, politicians and civil

servants that there were strong arguments for increasing WoB based on the idea that women might contribute differently from men, and thereby complement board work. Below is a quote from a woman director highlighting this viewpoint.

Because of differences, not biological differences, but differences related to socialisation, expectations and background, women bring something beyond their gender. We should have the same opportunities as men for influence, and given the chance, we do. It is not a right to be on a board, but it should be a right to be treated fairly.

This quote fits with the ideas of the specific feminist discourse in Norway where moderate liberal feminist arguments are often found (Heidenreich 2012).

While the official public and media debates were dominated by utility and the business case for or against increasing WoB before the introduction of the gender-balance law, the wider interests for both businesses and society were the dominant motivational factors for the vast majority of the actors in Norway, supported by justice rationales. There were some variations among the groups of actors. We observed that actors from the political arena, mostly individual politicians, were most inclined to include social-justice logic, while individual-justice and utility lines had broad support from most actors and groups of actors. The Norwegian government finally argued for introducing the gender-balance law based on several reasons related to utility and some related to justice (The Norwegian Government 2008), but the law was finally presented and introduced based on utility logics and the business case for gender diversity on boards.

#### *England: Motivations and Interactions*

In the case of England (Appendix 2), we observed that key interactions were between various civil society, business/corporate, and international and transnational actors. The interaction between state actors and other actors was relatively limited and mainly related to interactions between political leaders, business leaders and researchers. In England, we found that the key actors pushing openly for initiatives to increase the number of WoB were the following groups: the 30 % Club, researchers (Cranfield in particular), individual businesses/corporations, individual civil servants, organisations (e.g. associations of directors) and equality-oriented powerful individuals, such as trade union leaders and former politicians (both men and women). We observed how all of these groups of actors to a certain extent were influenced and motivated by international pressure and development; this development gave the actors a platform to build on. We found most

interaction among civil society, business, and international and transnational actors. Most of the actors in England had interactions with international and transnational actors. This included researchers, international associations, international women's networks and, in particular, actors with links and experience from Norway (politicians, directors [mainly women, but also men], and women's networks). We observed that in the case of England, the international and transnational actors played influential roles in different arenas and at different points in time. In particular, we observed increased importance of EU and international political pressure.

Although we observed that the government and political leaders seemed to officially be absent from the debate on WoB, actions such as support for research funding on the topic of WoB indicated that behind the scenes the government was orchestrating and lobbying with key politicians and talking to business leaders and researchers. This is also acknowledged by researchers who have been working with political leaders on this issue, as illustrated in the following quote.

It is not that the political leaders do not care, it is that they haven't been sure how to approach this issue. They know they need to respond, and I believe they think this is important, but their approach has been more of an invisible nature.

Although England has had a heated debate on how to increase WoB, we observed that few actors openly support quotas as a strategy. The debate in England has been highly centred around the business case for diversity. In fact, neither the public/political debates nor the Lord Davies Report tends to focus on the justice-case rationale, individual or social. This is visible in the following quote from the Lord Davies report.

There is a strong business case for gender balanced boards. Inclusive and diverse boards are more likely to be effective boards, better able to understand their customers and stakeholders and to benefit from fresh perspectives, new ideas, vigorous challenge and broad experience. This in turn leads to better decision making (Lord Davies Report 2011, page 7).

Over the last few years, in particular, we observed how politicians have publicly entered the debate and, despite scepticism to quotas, the importance of increasing the share of WoB has been recognised. This is presented based on utility logics and the business case for increasing WoB. This is visible in the following quote from Business Secretary, Vince Cable quoted by the BBC who argued that:

My vision by 2015 is that Britain will not have a single FTSE 100 board without a significant female



presence,” He goes on to say “This is not about equality, this is about good governance and good business, (BBC 2013).

We found that among actors and groups of actors at the civil society and business/corporate level, there was also a strong tendency to focus on utility rationales for increasing the share of WoB. This is illustrated in the following quote from one of the key actors from research.

There are strong economic benefits for increasing the share of women on boards. This is the case for businesses and for the country. Increasing the share of WoB is not about equality or being politically correct, it is a strong and convincing rational.

We observed that at the beginning of our observation period, the English public debate and response were very much linked to upper-class politeness, where the elites seem to have been denying the existence of the problem of potential barriers for women in the labour market and in society. We found little use of social-justice lines of arguments. Interestingly, one of the exceptions is found among actors from trade unions and among ex-politicians, who we describe as equality-oriented powerful individuals. They also rationalised their involvement based on social-justice logics. This is highlighted in a quote from a former politician.

I can't just sit and watch the rest of Europe finally taking actions for creating more equality between the sexes in the labour market. It is my duty to make this my case.

These actors have, among other activities, arranged workshops and meetings with national and international actors.

Researchers have been important in putting focus on the lack of WoB in England. Although such focus, together with the Lord Davies Report, has led to some increase of women on British boards, the progress is modest. As a result, we observed an increased focus on, and a more positive attitude towards, public policy strategies to increase WoB. In particular, we observed how over the last couple of years, several of the civil society actors, including researchers who had taken a strong stand against quotas and only presented support for increasing the share of WoB based on utility logic, were now closer to the Lord Davies Report initiative, more nuanced in their view of both quotas and involvement beyond the business case.

The increased focus and change in attitude among some of the actors indicate that within the English WoB debate, quotas started to become if not an accepted option, at least an option that is acknowledged:

I thought we would see more results by now. One thing that has been evident in the debates and my

observations is how we need a culture shift in organisations. There are barriers for women, it might be time to address these now, otherwise we will never get to where we want to be.

In the case of England, we found a few examples of actors being motivated by idealistic values and social-justice rationales. Nevertheless, political correctness and the need for a response to international pressure in relation to WoB seem to have been the key motivating factors among most actors. This was supported by utility rationales and the business case for diversity. Nevertheless, there seems to be some development in terms of motivational factors and rationales among some groups of actors in England, acknowledging the need for individual-justice lines of arguments identifying barriers. This development highlights the importance of looking at WoB developments and the involvement of actors as a dynamic process.

#### *Germany: Motivations and Interactions*

In the case of Germany, we observed an increase in interactions between various groups of actors at all four levels over the last few years. The key actors we identified as important in developing the German WoB initiatives were trade unions, researchers, interest groups, WoB associations, women's business/professional networks, international women's networks, the EU, and in later phases also political parties. We saw some interactions between all these groups of actors.

We observed that throughout our observation period, the process has been very much pushed forward by women in different types of professional associations, trade unions and networks. These women were highly influenced by individual-justice lines of argument mixed with utility rationales, both focusing on the business and wider society. Arguments, such as the one below, were often put forward to rationalise their involvement.

It will of course be beneficial with more women on boards. Women take higher education to a greater extent than men; it makes good business sense to increase diversity in senior positions. I have met barriers in the labour market and so have several of my female colleagues. Quotas might give us a platform to challenge this and it is about time.

Moreover, researchers have been an important group of actors. They have created awareness of the lack of women in senior positions and also of the existence of potential barriers in the labour market. We observed how researchers and individual politicians together with civil servants have been pushing for change. The rationale often used in these interactions was centred round the ideas of the justice case.

We don't have equal opportunities in Germany. Talking about the benefits of having more women on boards in the DAX companies will not change this. We need quotas and force a change in order to challenge the structural barriers in the labour market. The fact that it will be beneficial with more women in senior positions is of course a great bonus.

We observed that European pressure becomes a key influential actor for the political setting. This international pressure has also been visible in the media debates. The focus of these media debates varied. The *Wirtschaftwoche* magazine had a somewhat sceptical focus as illustrated in the following quote.

EU threatens with quota (Wettach 2011).

While others, such as the *Daily Süddeutsche Zeitung*, had a more of a supportive focus:

This is an important first step both for supporters and for women, and must be valued as such...And when applying to management jobs, women must be reviewed more thoroughly for their suitability, because this is what it's about... competency. Never before have there been so many well-educated women. The failure to use their knowledge is both economically unwise and discriminatory (*Daily Süddeutsche Zeitung*, quoted in English in *Spiegel Online* 2012).

We observed that international pressure, the work of some of the core civil society and business/corporate actors, as well as media focus, made German political parties put national public policies for WoB on their agendas. Nevertheless, we found great political disagreement and heated discussions around the topic. This open political debate about WoB and the use of public policy strategies was more heated in Germany than in the other countries observed. In particular, the public disagreement between the former Minister of Family Affairs and the former Minister of Social Affairs (both Conservative Party) illustrated the political power game connected with the national public policy initiative in Germany. Finally, the Conservative Party was "forced" to implement a quota law in their federal election programme in order to secure a government majority. Hence, for some of the actors in politics, promotion of other ends and electoral considerations were the most important motivational factors in their involvement.

We found that although some of the key actors in Germany had been pushing for a change based on idealistic values and the ideas of justice, the final phase in Germany was very much influenced by both domestic political games and by political correctness in a context where most

European countries and the EU have quotas on the agenda. Although political leaders indicated great scepticism concerning quotas, there has been a change in the discourse. Chancellor Angela Merkel was originally publicly sceptical to quotas as a strategy, but she later defended the law based on justice logic, indicating a change in Germany's approach to the issue of the lack of WoB and women in senior positions in general.

This law is an important step for equality because it will initiate cultural change in the workplace (BBC 2014).

We observed that Germany was more influenced than the other countries by EU directives, international political pressure and the development in other European countries; hence, a wide range of international and transnational actors were highly involved in the process. In particular, we also observed that a wide range of German actors, including German WoB associations, trade unions, interest groups, policy-makers and researchers, had strong interaction with Norwegian actors, including researchers and women's networks.

### *Italy: Motivations and Interactions*

In the case of Italy, we observed that key interactions were between various civil society and international and transnational actors, and to a lesser extent business/corporate actors. In particular, we observed interactions between individual women politicians, individual women in academia and individual women in business, and international researchers. We observed that the individual civil society actors have led in pushing for change, which includes individual women politicians, individual women academics and individual women in business. Utility lines of arguments were mainly put forward to rationalise the support of quotas by these groups of actors. The following quote highlights this logic.

Boards need diversity in competences and points of view..., and having more women will have great benefits.

Moreover, we observed that the self-interest of some of these actors was important. This was evident at an early stage where we noticed how women, mainly from academia and business, recognised how a law could be beneficial for them. Some of these actors had strong connections internationally and worked closely with transnational and international actors, including researchers, to push for the law. We identified that these actors actively used their networks to gain access to power. The more individualistically driven among some core actors were unique for the Italian case.

Individual women politicians have also been important in determining the national public policy in Italy. Interestingly, some of these women were from quite different political factions. Moreover, we did not observe strong collaboration between these; rather, they all worked individually toward the goal. We also observed that initiatives from associations (associations of accountants, auditors etc.) had been central in supporting the law. The media and individual journalists were also important actors and played a bigger part in the Italian process leading up to the law than similar actors did in the other countries. Justice lines of arguments were put forward by several actors from the media. This is visible from the following quote from one of the journalists.

We needed a shock to the system. The hope is that this will set off a cultural change.

In Italy, the experience of introducing quotas in Norway was used to rationalise the use of this type of strategy by several actors. In fact, international focus on WoB meant that actors and groups of actors were given a platform and an opportunity for change.

### Cross-Country Findings

The results previously discussed paint a picture of many nuances. It is important to understand actors, their motivations and their interactions to understand why countries may choose different national public policies to increase the share of WoB. Some of the key characteristics and dominant patterns within the four countries are presented in Table 2.

We observed that the “national public policy initiative stories”, building on Krook’s terminology, vary across countries. All four main types of stories presented by Krook were observed, and combinations of them were found in the various countries. In the case of Norway, the importance of women mobilising for quotas to increase women’s representation was particularly prevalent in the process of the national public policy initiative. Moreover, quotas were consistent with existing and/or emerging notions of equality and representation; hence, the quota idea had broad political support and real opportunity for acceptance. England’s national public policy initiative was highly influenced by international pressure. Hence, we found that the process in England fits with the ideas that national public policy initiatives were supported by international norms and spread through transnational sharing. In the case of Germany, we also observed that the process fits with the ideas that quotas are supported by international norms and spread through transnational sharing. Moreover, we observed the role of women in the process. Women mobilising to increase women’s representation have been

and still are important in the German process. In Italy, the process started after the law in Norway was introduced, and experiences from Norway were heavily used to support the initiative. Although we observed that political support from state level has been limited, the Italian approach with national public policy initiative for WoB has been supported by various groups of elites recognising the strategic advantage.

Making sense of developments within the four countries requires focusing particularly on the role of political actors and the political processes, because these are essential for understanding both decisions on public policy actions and the further implementation procedures of these. We observed that the key political actors in Norway ended up being political parties, but individual politicians started the change process. Norway and Norwegian politicians were proactive. The national public policy initiative had broad political support at the time of implementation. In the case of England, on the other hand, we observed that political leaders, mainly in their role as “invisible hands”, had some importance. Nevertheless, the political leaders’ involvement was more reactive than in the case of Norway because there was a need to respond to international pressure. In Germany, we observed that from being absent, political parties became key actors, but their response and involvement were more of a proactive nature. Moreover, the WoB debate in Germany was characterised by negotiations between the political parties and by greater political game playing. While the political support for national public policy initiatives has been diffuse, political support increased. In the case of Italy, we observed how the key political actors were in fact individual politicians who acted proactively before international pressure was established. Nevertheless, we observed that the political support in general was limited. The quota regulation in Italy has some penalties for non-compliance, but as the law is still in the implementation period, we have not yet seen the level of political buy in for the strategy among politicians, but our observations indicate that this is lacking.

By following and analysing the public policy initiatives, developments, actors and changes in Norway, England, Germany and Italy, we identify a framework for making sense of cross-national differences in the acceptance and implantation of initiatives to increase WoB. This framework is presented in Table 3.

The framework has two dimensions. These are political support and dominant discourse among key actors. The first dimension ranges from individual/fragmented to broad/general political support, highlighting the different types of involvement from political leaders and parties within the process of determining national public policy initiatives. The second dimension highlights different motivational discourses among key actors, ranging from

**Table 2** Stories of national public policy initiatives (NPPIs) and the role of political actors

NPPIs	1. Consistent with existing/emerging notions of equality and representation	2. Women mobilize to increase women's representation	3. Political elites recognise strategic advantages	4. Supported by international norms, spread through transnational sharing	Political actors	Political process	Political support
Norway	X	X			Political parties	Proactive	Broad
England				X	Political leaders (invisible hand)	Reactive	Fragmented
Germany		X		X	Political parties	Reactive	Increasing
Italy				(X)	Individual politicians	Proactive	Limited

**Table 3** Proposed framework: political support and key motivations among actors

	Self-interest	Business utility	Societal utility
Individual/fragmented political support	Italy	England Germany	
Broad/general political support			Norway

promotion of other means (self-interest) to utility, distinguishing between business utility and wider interest and utility for society.

In the case of Norway, we identified broad political support, with a wide range of politicians and political parties as key actors pushing for quotas. Moreover, we identified a discourse where the wider interest of business and society was the predominant theme among most actors and groups of actors. In England, we observed only individual/fragmented support for national public policy initiatives to increase WoB. England was to a certain extent forced to respond, and the ambition to get the EU off their backs resulted in some increase of WoB. However, it has not resulted in a discourse where actors, politicians and corporations buy into the argument that increasing WoB is good for business and the wider society. In Germany, a voluntary codex for diversity on boards has been in place for several years without changing the gender balance in the boardroom significantly. Looking at the political support for change in Germany, the lack of change can be explained by the lack of broad/general political support and strong visible political actors. The public discourse about WoB in Germany was for a while characterised by scepticism to quotas and their effect, but in Germany, we observed that scepticism decreased. In the case of Italy, which also introduced quotas, the fact that we saw only modest changes concerning WoB can be partly explained by the individual/fragmented political support, with no clear penalty for non-compliance and with key actors

mainly motivated by promotion of other political means (self-interest).

## Discussion

The objective of our study was to contribute to the discussion of increasing the number of WoB by addressing the puzzles surrounding introductions of national public policy initiatives for WoB through an investigation of actors, the dynamic relationships, interactions between actors, and their motivations. We explored the development of national public policy initiatives to increase the number of women on boards, and we have focused on the importance of processes and individual actors pushing for change. We have presented the findings that the international business and political landscape on these issues are fast changing, that actors pushing for change have various objectives and that the consequences of various initiatives are not static.

## Novel Use of a Theoretical Framework

Studies of boards of directors and studies about WoB have used theories coming from several disciplines. Krook's (2007) framework adapted to explore and analyse WoB issues in our study stems from political science, and we have applied it to the discussion of WoB and the use of national public policies. We have extended her framework to also include the business/corporate actors. We found this



helpful as it contributed to a focus on business/corporate level issues that until now have received little attention.

Krook (2007) helped us understand the core actors in each country, their motivation and their interactions, including the stories guiding the ongoing discourses. The focus of the study was on processes outside the boards and the boardroom, but with potential significant impact on what may take place inside the boards. The findings may make contributions in the field of organisation and management for a behavioural theory of the firm (Cyert and March 1963) or recent research directions labelled strategy as practice (Whittington 1996).

### Venturesome Processual Research Design

The presentation of an innovative research approach is a contribution from this study. We employed a processual analysis using a longitudinal country-comparative case study. Processual studies are embedded in context, process and time (Pye and Pettigrew 2005). Most studies presenting antecedents of WoB collect and use general statistics (see e.g. Grosvold and Brammer 2011 or the review by Terjesen et al. 2009). To understand the contemporary picture, the present study on the other hand closely followed the national debates within the four case countries. To describe the role of the key actors pushing for WoB change, we used qualitative data, building on interviews with key informants and actors, direct observations and participant observations. Members from the research team attended regularly, for more than ten years, political, business and civil society meetings in the four case countries. In addition, core activists were interviewed and followed over several years in each country.

Our study required much time and patience—and luck. It may be difficult to predict the future when initiating a ten-year-long research project. But the data's richness is unique. It “catches the reality in flight” (Pettigrew 1997). This research may be labelled a processual study (Pettigrew 1997; Pye and Pettigrew 2005), and there have been several calls for developing such studies. Processual studies “explore the dynamic quality of human conduct and organizational life and embed such dynamics over time in various layers of context in which streams of activities occurs” (Pettigrew 1997, p. 342).

We have searched for a holistic rather than a linear explanation of processes. We have studied processes across a number of levels, we have studied processes in past and present, we have made inferences about the future, we have linked the analyses to the locations and to the explanations of outcomes and we have had to balance involvement with the actors in the research process. This approach has been challenging, but following Pettigrew's recommendations

was very helpful. He provided a methodological insight that would have been difficult to achieve in other ways.

### The Changing International Landscape

The introduction of the gender-balance law for corporate boards in Norway started an international trend of using national public policy initiatives to increase WoB. Our study has interpreted the lessons from Norway about the introduction of quotas on corporate boards. By following the cases of Norway, England, Germany and Italy, we have observed how the snowball that started rolling in Norway may become a global avalanche (Machold et al. 2013). Nevertheless, when Norway introduced the gender-balance law, it was considered a radical step. The contextual landscape has changed since then quotas are no longer a radical concept nor are they a shock to regulatory and economic systems. This is important because actors in other countries work in a context with greater opportunities for politicking and determining national public policy initiatives as a result of this.

### The Politicking of Actors Pushing for Change

Most research about boards of directors is static (Gabrielsson and Huse 2004). This is also the case regarding WoB studies as revealed in the review by Terjesen et al. (2009). However, focusing on actors and their motivations and interactions introduces dynamic perspectives about politicking. We observed variations in the background and motivation of actors and how this led to variations in the dynamics and developments taking place in the various countries. Such variations may also imply that individual actors may influence developments and that actors' involvement might change over time.

Grosvold and Brammer (2011) demonstrate the importance of national institutional systems, and they argue that as much as half of the variation in the presence of WoB is explained by national institutional systems. What has not received the same attention in the WoB literature is the critical role of actors pushing for change and their motivations and how this can change and develop over time. This was also observed in the study. Our findings suggest that at a macro level, the countries represent different “stories” of adopting national public policies to increase WoB, highly influenced by politicking and the role of actors as well as historical and institutional factors. The stories we observed correspond with Krook (2007).

Our findings indicate that it is necessary to understand the overall political games in each country. Such games, as the micro-politics among various actors and groups of actors, must be included. Consequently, focusing on

processes and the role of actors allows for understanding why different and to a certain extent surprising patterns exist.

## Conclusion

It is without doubt that the use of national public policies to increase the percentage of WoB has become an important area for academics, businesses and policy-makers globally. This article is, to our knowledge, the first study to explore the spread of national public policies to increase the presence of WoB by focusing on the role of actors and processes using a longitudinal research design.

Nevertheless, while we contribute to the growing body of WoB research, we acknowledge that this study has some limitations that can be addressed in further research. The micro, meso and macro level dynamics explored in this study have generally been overlooked in earlier studies about WoB. In our study, the actors, their motivation, their interactions and how they work to exert influence in specific contexts have been explored and identified in four countries. Only a few of the possible analyses of this set of data have been used to explore our research question, and a rich set of data has been made available for future studies. Moreover, in our study we included Norway, England, Germany and Italy. The inclusion of a broader international analysis should be considered for the generalisability of the findings. This approach may involve including analyses of additional countries, particularly countries where the discussions of quota regulations have evolved differently. The four countries in our study helped us explore our research objectives, but despite differences, the countries are all strongly embedded within West-European culture. Exploring similar research questions in countries embedded in other geographical areas, in other cultures and with other institutional arrangements may bring additional nuances to the picture, and this will also give more strength for generalisations.

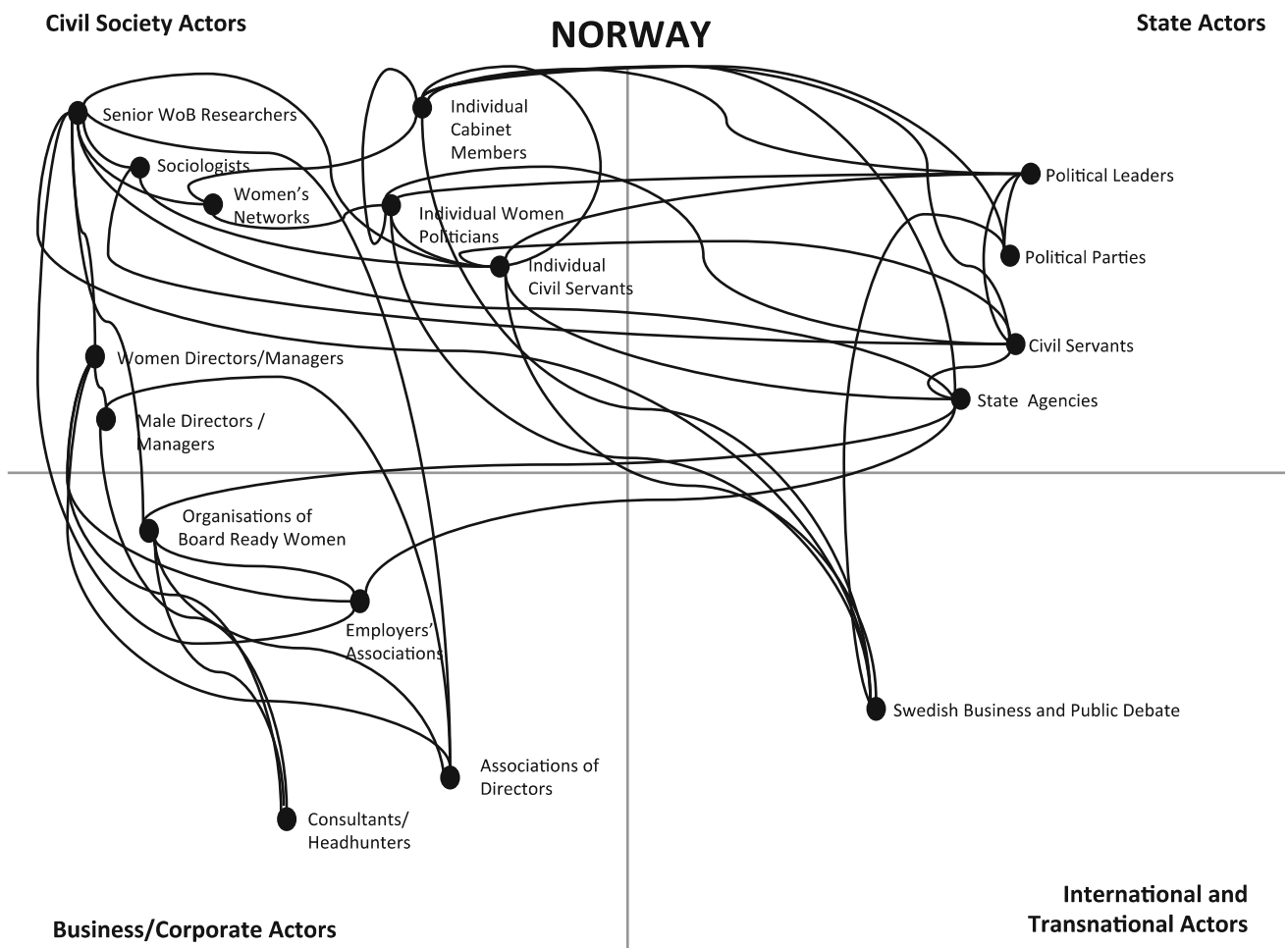
Furthermore, an important area for further research would be to investigate real changes taking place in different countries when considering board composition and diversity in more detail. In particular, future contributions could investigate changes among directors, especially among the women who benefit from national public policies. Moreover, in the study we found significant interactions among actors and groups of actors both between and within the different sectors. These cross-sector interactions seem to be important for the adoptions of various national public policy initiatives to increase WoB in the four countries in this study. However, we also found that both

in-sector interactions and cross-sector interactions varied across the four countries. This variation suggests that focusing on actors, actor-network theories and analyses may be appropriate and even necessary to apply in future studies on WoB and the use of national public policy initiatives. Similar studies will also be needed to explore more in-depth the dynamics being observed.

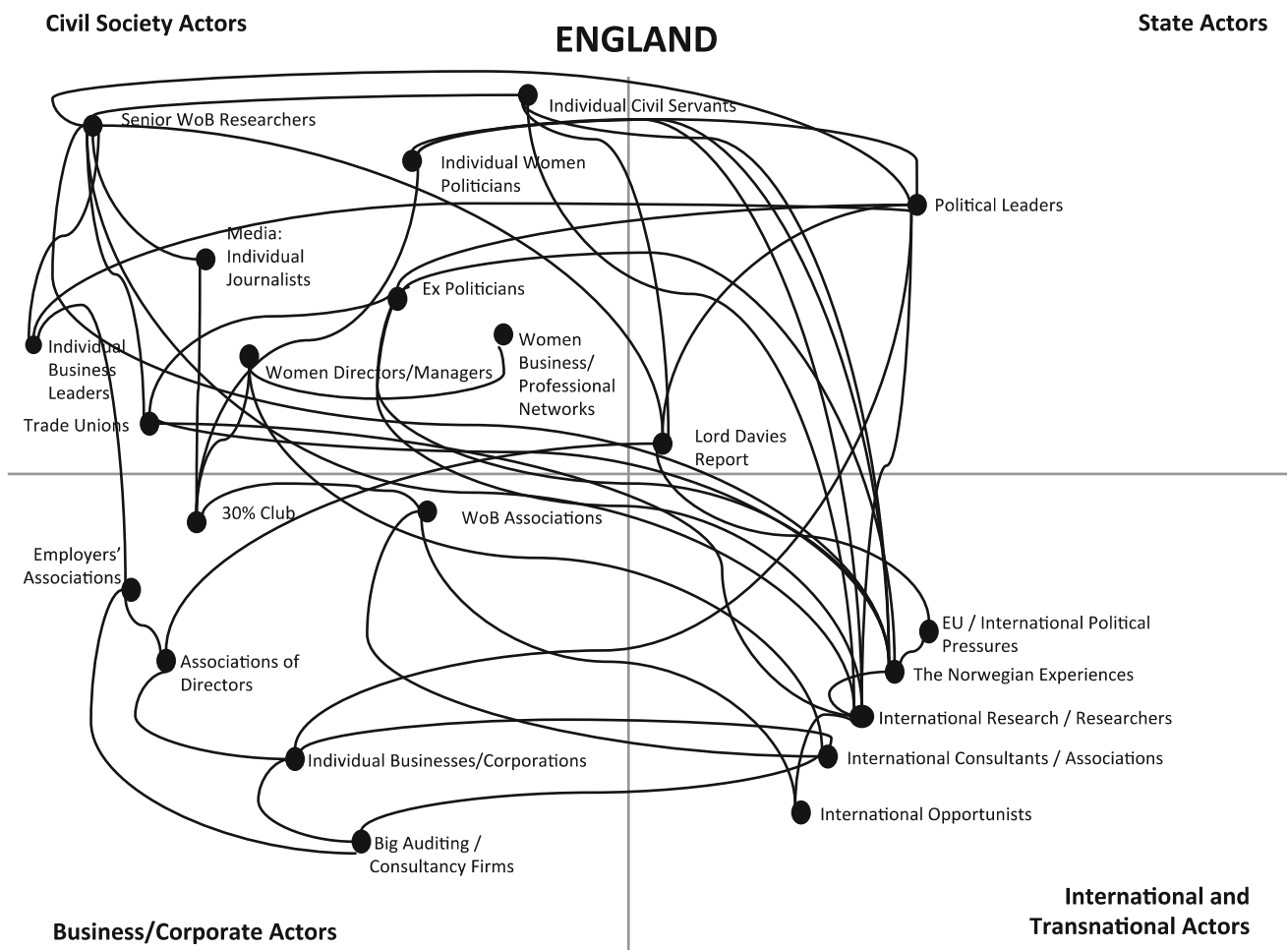
Our findings are important for both practitioners and policy-makers. Our observations about key actors, network interactions, motivational factors, national discourses and the different national public policy initiatives imply that national public policy initiatives should not be directly copied from one country to another. We propose that the likelihood of national public policy initiatives, including quotas being introduced, is higher in countries in which there exists broad political support and where several political factions are identified as key actors. Moreover, we observed that for national public policy initiatives to create real change concerning WoB, the chances are higher if the wider interests for business and society are the predominant rationales in the discourse among key actors. Consequently, we argue that for WoB policy initiatives (whether they be quotas or voluntary targets) to be introduced, successfully implemented and create real change, the existence of broad political support and a national discourse is necessary where the wider interest for business and society is the rationale.

To conclude, in this article we have employed a processual design approach using a longitudinal country-comparative case study to understand the spread of national public policies to increase WoB. We have shown the importance of the political games influencing these decisions in Norway, England, Germany and Italy. The study contributes by filling important gaps in the literature by embedding the discussion about women on boards in politicking, national public policies and by introducing dynamic perspectives. Firstly, the theoretical framework is novel. We used and adapted Krook (2007) for the exploration of initiatives to increase the number of women on boards. Secondly, a venturesome research design focusing on processes was applied (Pettigrew 1997) and we captured the reality of the WoB debates at different points of time and in different actor and motivational contexts. Thirdly, we showed how the international landscape about using quotas for women on boards is fast changing. Fourthly, we highlight that the politicking of actors pushing for change may be more important than the institutional setting. Fifthly, a new research agenda for exploring the questions about WoB was suggested and illustrated, and finally, the study has contributed to giving directions for practitioners and policy-makers.

## Appendix 1: Actor Interactions Norway

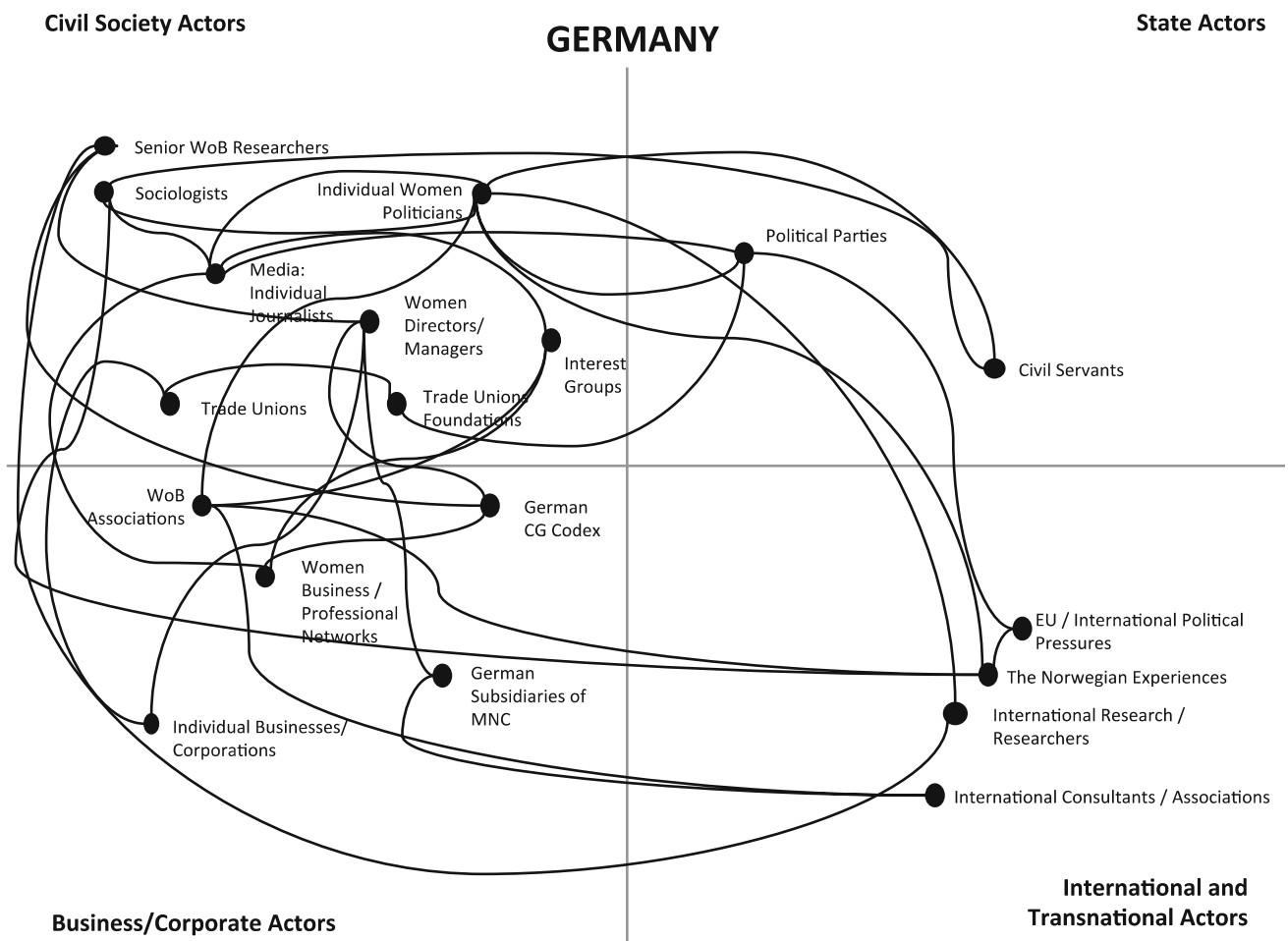


## Appendix 2: Actor Interactions England

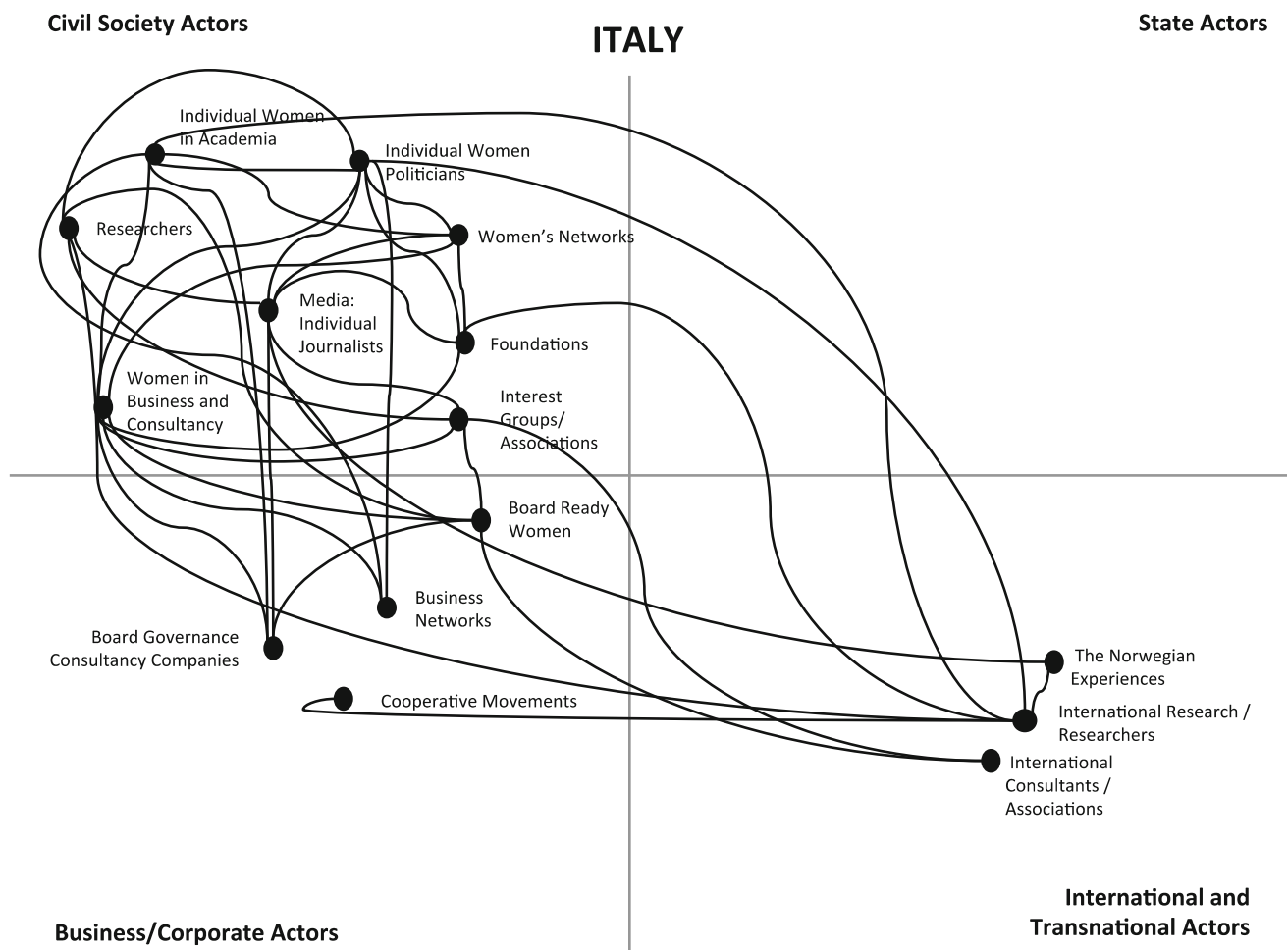




### Appendix 3: Actor Interactions Germany



## Appendix 4: Actor Interactions Italy



## Appendix 5

See Table 4.

Table 4 Motivational factors

	Norway	England	Germany Sociologists	Italy
Principled stand (the social- justice case)	Women's Network Individual Women Politicians Individual Civil Servants Individual Cabinet Members Sociologists Some Politicians	Ex-Politicians (men and women)	Trade Unions Trade Unions' Foundations Women Directors/Managers	Media: Individual Journalists Cooperative Movements
Electoral Consideration			Some Political Parties	
Empty Gestures	Some Politicians	Individual Women Politicians Individual Businesses/Corporations	Some Political Parties Individual Businesses/Corporations German Subsidiaries of MNCs German CG Codex	
Promotion of Other (political) Ends (self- interest)	Some Politicians Headhunters/Consultants Business Associations (Innovation Norway, NHO)	Big Auditing Firms Individual Businesses/Corporations Women Directors/Managers Women Business/Professional Networks Associations of Directors WoB Associations 30 % Club Trade Unions	Interest Groups (e.g. women lawyers) Individual Women Politicians Individual Businesses/Corporations German Subsidiaries of MNC Media: Individual Journalists	Individual Women Politicians Individual Women Academics Individual Women in Business/ Consultancy Interest Groups/Associations Board Governance Consultancy Companies Media: Individual Journalists
Extension of Representational Guarantees (social justice)	Individual Cabinet Members Individual Women Politicians Civil Servants Individual Civil Servants Political Leaders		Sociologists Trade Unions	
International Pressure	Swedish Business and Public Debates	Individual Women Politicians Political Leaders (the invisible hand) Individual Businesses/Corporations Employers' Associations Associations of Directors WoB Associations 30 % Club Researchers	Women Professional/Business Networks Political Parties	

Table 4 continued

	Norway	England	Germany Sociologists	Italy
Transnational Learning		Big Auditing/Consultancy Firms (e.g. McKinsey)	Senior WoB Researchers	Individual Women Politicians Individual Women Academics Researchers
Individual-Justice Line of Argument	Women Directors/Managers Male Directors/Managers Individual Women Politicians Individual Cabinet Members (men and women) Individual Civil Servants Political Leaders	Women Business/Professional Networks Civil Servants	Women Directors/Managers Sociologists Trade Unions' Foundations Civil Servants	Individual Women Politicians Individual Women Academics Individual Women in Business/ Consultancy Women's Networks Foundations Researchers Business Networks Corporations
Utility Arguments (the business case)	Senior WoB Researchers Sociologists Women Directors/Managers Male Directors/Managers Women's Networks Organisation of Board-Ready Women Political Parties Employers' Associations Associations of Directors Politicians (men and women) Civil Servants State Agencies	30 % Club Senior WoB Researchers Individual Businesses/Corporations Individual Women politicians Lord Davies Report Media: Individual Journalists Civil Servants	Political parties Women Business/Professional Networks WoB Associations Individual Businesses/Corporations German Subsidiaries of MNC Civil Servants	Individual Women Politicians Individual Women Academics Individual Women in Business/ Consultancy Women's Networks Media: Individual Journalists Researchers Board-Ready Women Business Networks
Additional observations	The majority of the key actors involved were proactive, being motivated by a wide range of factors, including both justice and business-case lines of argument.	The majority of actors started their involvement late. Several of these seem to be highly motivated by being part of the political power game and by upper-class politeness.	The majority of actors started their involvement late. Some of the actors are motivated by international pressure and the desire not to be dictated to by the EU.	Important actors or groups of actors are elites intrinsically motivated by being part of the political power game or motivated by individual gains.



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