

Summary of Target Issue

What is affirmative action?

Affirmative action essentially seeks to address and reduce historical discrimination of underrepresented groups; the aim is to instruct policies which ensure a more equal representation of these groups, in relation to their gender, color, religion or race 'It grew out of a 1961 executive order of President John F. Kennedy in which the term affirmative action was first used.' (Tomasson *et al*, 2001, p.vii). 'Affirmative action as delineated by Executive Order 11246, "is," in the words of President Clinton "simply a tool in the pursuit of that enduring national interest, equal opportunity.'" (Tomasson *et al*, 2001, p.15)

However, today women are still underrepresented in professions such as politics and boardroom positions; this is surprising given that 'more women than men are successful graduates.' (Street Porter, 2011). Affirmative action for women usually involves policy or legislation which insists on gender quotas, and is a way of ensuring dominance of one gender (male or female) does not occur.

The Global Gender Gap Report (2011) has seen Ireland overtake its nearest neighbours the UK by improving year on year, going from a rank of 10 in 2006 to a rank of 5 in 2011. (Hausmann *et al*, 2012 p.127). Convexly the UK has seen a steady worsening of overall ranking going from 9th in 2006, to 16th in 2011. (Hausmann, 2012 Page, 265). Iceland has maintained the top ranking position of 1st since 2009 (Hausmann *et al*, 2012 p. 119).

Women in Politics

Former Irish President Mary Robinson vocalised her support for affirmative action for women in political roles in 2011. She supports a gender quota in the short term (10 years) in order to increase female representation in what is a predominantly male environment. Robinson sees gender quotas as the only way to make a significant change to the system and achieve parity or near parity.

Later in 2011, Joanna Tuffy (Labour Party TD, Ireland) disagreed, claiming gender quota's to be a form of discrimination preventing the right person getting the job. Tuffy is fearful that under the new legislation "parties will be required to discriminate between the candidates on the basis of their gender" and believes that the legislation could actually be used "to discriminate against women as well". (Tuffy, 2012)

A bill has now been passed in Irish Political system which will see political party funding reduced if they do not achieve at 'least 30 per cent female and 30 per cent male candidates , or face their funding being cut in half' (Regan, 2012).

Women in the Boardroom

UK Prime minister Cameron, suggest he will only resort to quotas as a last resort, preferring instead to encourage businesses to hire more women rather than change legislation. (Cameron, 2012) This sentiment is echoed by Paul Nuttall (IPUK) who disagrees entirely with the concept of quotas, claiming that they will not allow the right person to get the job, and are unnecessary.

Janet Street Porter, (2011) an outspoken English journalist is clear about the need for quotas, and supports the need to increase female representation in boardroom positions. She titles her article "Men blew it - now only quotas will do women justice" claiming "it's no time for pussyfooting and threats" and that we should "forget waiting for businessmen to change

horribly ingrained ways of thinking. They need a giant kick up the backside,” because without quotas, “change in British boardrooms isn't happening at a snail's pace, but a glacial one.” Additionally she claims “a McKinsey report found that businesses with large numbers of women of their boards outperformed their rivals, achieving 42 per cent more sales and 53 per cent higher return on equity.” (Street Porter, 2011)

Women at the Oscars

Michael Barthel, (2012), a PhD candidate at the University of Washington, suggests that maybe Hollywood needs affirmative action too. Barthel points out that women are grossly underrepresented in the prestigious nominations for best picture/ director categories of the Oscar nominations. In fact the trend is not looking good as ‘women made up only 5% of Hollywood directors last year, a drop from 7% in 2010.’ (Harris, 2012)

That aside, Barthel notes that those films which do make the Oscar nominations tend to be problematic, speaking about “The Bridesmaids” he points out that “it’s notable that only a female comedy that was repeatedly, and pointedly, presented as a male “raunch comedy” with female leads could receive recognition.” Similarly “The Help” represents women in a problematic way too; “In the best picture category, male leads get to be actors, landowners, adventurers, inventors, writers, executives, soldiers and architects. Female leads get to be ... housewives or domestic servants.” Barthel claims that the only films that are taken seriously do not “represent anything close to the entirety of women’s experiences” and merely “emphasizes gender stereotypes.” Barthel recognises that “for women to have so few opportunities in the upper ranks of such an important industry is absurd,” and concludes that “if the Oscars are anything to judge by, then Hollywood doesn’t value women very highly at all”.

Principled Arguments Against

Affirmative Action ≠ Equality

Those in opposition to affirmative action often contend that it is not an entirely perfect system of promoting equality as it can in fact discriminate against men, and lowers the standards of women in the workforce.

It is often said that with affirmative action a person is not judged on their competence alone which could result in men who are more qualified being overlooked for a position. This is viewed as a form of reverse discrimination as it effectively gives preferential treatment to women over men. This is thought to result in greater animosity towards women, something which counteracts the intended results of affirmative action.

It is also seen as an inadequate system of promoting equality because women are, in a manner of speaking, given preferential treatment. This can depreciate the value of their accomplishments and also lead to undeserving women getting jobs. This is thought of as a system which will lower the standards of women and employment in society.

Principled Arguments For

Argument 1 – Slide 1

There are three strong arguments in support of affirmative action for women. The first of those arguments is based on rational choice. This approach seeks to recognize the restrictions of rational procedures, not by replacing rational decisions with emotional appeals, but by introducing corrective measures which would be accepted and endorsed by most rational

people. A rational approach to decision making is based on an individual's gains and losses, as part of the view that the community is built on such choices of individuals. Christopher Jencks (1992) stated that a company who is self-interested will be rewarded for practising discrimination, so long as other companies do not, as the inability to exclude this company from benefiting makes it rational for them to be discriminatory. The lessening of these forms of discrimination however can only occur if there is affirmative action, or if 'fairness' is guaranteed by building it into organizational practices that explicitly prohibit consumer, worker and statistical discrimination.

Argument 2 – Slide 2

The second strong argument suggests that most people are capable of reaching a common agreement about the basic principles of what is fair and reasonable. Based on the 'veil of ignorance' concept in his imaginative experiment, John Rawls was able to show how reasonable people will endorse affirmative action as a requirement of the just society. The experiment involves asking individuals to imagine a world where they were in charge of deciding the rules of society, as well as distributing a fair and equal share of valued goods between all. However the 'veil of ignorance' means that the person is also blind to any knowledge concerning personal characteristics or statuses. So no information about yourself is known, only that you live in this world. What he found was that reasonable people can agree on fair principles under this condition, which usually include public policies and criteria for receiving benefits.

Argument 3 – Slide 3

The third argument focuses on what we want the world to be like for future generations. Like everything, sacrifices must be made in order to achieve results and 'buy' the future we seek. But what is the price are we willing to pay? The price can be thought of in two ways; making a purchase or paying taxes. Paying taxes can be seen as paying somebody without any personal benefits, but purchasing something means you want it and it will be of benefit to

you. Affirmative action can be seen as a method of purchasing the future we wish for. Through sacrificing privileges, and shifting a portion of them to others, a better future can be achieved. For example, qualified female candidates who were interviewed for positions ahead of similarly qualified male candidates at universities, in an attempt to bridge the gender gap, have turned universities in California into better learning environments as there is a greater mix of backgrounds and perspectives, all made possible by the affirmative action policy.

Research Findings For

Crosby et al., (2003) outline how affirmative action is superior in rewarding and promoting talent than the more passive policy of equal opportunity. They support affirmative action on the grounds of fairness, merit, and equality. They demonstrated that measures of merit are often influenced by historical and current prejudice and that psychological factors, arising from prejudice, may cause some minority group members and women to underperform on tests. Affirmative action helps to detect these direct and indirect effects of prejudice by demanding that people examine whether a discrepancy exists for targeted groups between availability (applicants) and incumbency (successful candidates). If a discrepancy is found, “a plan is implemented for taking concrete measures to eliminate the barriers and to establish true equality” (p. 95), thus achieving a “true meritocracy” (p. 109) undistorted by prejudice. Since 1970, women’s salaries and wages have increased much more rapidly than men’s salaries and wages. In 1980, white women earned 59% of what white men earned but by 1989, the figure was 66.5%

Case studies were conducted at three universities (CKSU, Denby College and Newton University) that significantly changed the status of women faculty during the 1970s (Hyer, 1985). This article discusses the two most frequently cited factors for this success - leadership of top administrators and pressure from women faculty as well as other environmental and structural changes supporting affirmative action.

Research Findings Against

Presumed incompetent

Heilman, Lucas, and Block (1992) Study 1: Participants read a job description and then reviewed successful job applications of either a man, a woman, or an affirmative-action woman for a position that was gender-typed either as strongly male (electrician) or slightly male (hospital laboratory technician). Experimental manipulation was presented at the bottom of the application forms. In all conditions the word 'Hire' was written in by hand; but in the affirmative action conditions, the phrase 'affirmative action hiree' was also included. This was combined with a section in the job description stating that the employer is an 'Affirmative Action Equal Opportunity Employer'.

The affirmative-action label increased perceived problems for women. Nonaffirmative-action women were viewed as less competent only in the strongly male gender-typed job. However, affirmative-action women were viewed as less competent than men in both jobs, and also less competent than nonaffirmative-action women.

Self-Perceptions

Heilman, Simon, & Repper (1987) conducted research in which the participant was required to engage in a one-way communication task in the company of another individual (a confederate). The participant was always given the role of leader, and the confederate the role of follower. However, a role assignment protocol was carried out in which participants were either given the role of leader due to their superior performance on a communication inventory (merit), or else given the role of leader due to their gender (preference). Following task completion, participants were randomly assigned either a success or failure rating on their performance.

Only women's self perceptions and self-evaluations were negatively affected by sex-based preferential selection relative to the merit-based method. When selected due to their sex, women devalued their leadership performance, took less credit for success, reported less interest in being a leader, and rated themselves as more deficient in leadership skills. Sex-related preferential selection had adverse consequences on how women view themselves and their performance.

Quota beliefs: the belief that affirmative action entails quotas (Unzueta, Gutierrez, & Ghavami, 2010). It is proposed that these beliefs serve a psychological function for nonbeneficiaries. In this respect, quota beliefs allow white men to reason that their accomplishments were attained *despite* the influence of discriminatory quotas, and that their failures occurred *because* of the influence of those quotas.

White women's self-image can benefit from affirmative action quota beliefs so long as they do not think of themselves as beneficiaries of the policy. Women in non-beneficiary condition who were told that affirmative action does not entail quotas reported lower self-esteem. Learning that affirmative action does not entail quotas may negatively affect the self-image of non-beneficiaries.

'Negotiating' affirmative action; (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007)

Men control a board of directors by affirming and negating affirmative action policies and by framing the process of recruitment and selection in such a way as to reproduce the male-dominated culture in the board. Members of social groups who dominate positions of leadership can create practices of exclusion, dominance, and marginalization through unintentional and strategic behaviours; thus in effect, 'policing' the boundaries of access to the highest positions in an organization. Gender stereotypes result in a situation where there is a perceived 'lack of fit' between the female attributes of domesticity, emotionality, and

subjectivity, and the dominance and leadership needed for a managerial role. Thus women may be excluded from specific positions of leadership because they do not 'fit' the profile of a manager.

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