The New York Times

Opinion

Stop Counting Women

Quotas and tallies won't bring real progress on gender parity.

By Katherine Mangu-Ward
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Feb. 23, 2019

I recently joined the board of a small nonprofit organization. I can't say for sure that my ovaries got me the gig, but I think they were at least part of my appeal. That uncertainty isn't pleasant, but it's less unpleasant than not being invited to join the board at all. The same is true for nearly every television or conference panel I'm asked to be on. Political journalism has long been male-dominated, libertarianism doubly so. For many professional women, doing gender-balance math is a tic, a reflexive response to being in too many rooms with too few other women.

That reflex was on display in January, when the announcement of Oscar nominations set off the annual ritual of counting up female nominees and then lamenting the ways in which women have been slighted. In recent years, the Hollywood commentariat has institutionalized my counting reflex.

In a typical example of the genre, The Atlantic declared "female filmmakers were entirely neglected." Bustle told its readers, "Don't celebrate too much" over women's success in the documentary category, but focus instead on how their numbers in the directing and cinematography categories were shockingly low. At the Golden Globes, even as she clutched her best supporting actress trophy, Regina King scolded Hollywood for not doing better and vowed "to make sure that everything I produce" is going to be "50 percent women."

Regina King at the Golden Globes, where she pledged to have gender parity in her productions.
Paul Drinkwater/NBC Universal, via Reuters

Women are, of course, more than capable of producing Oscar-worthy cinema or panel-worthy insights. However, the notion that the lack of perfectly equal representation is obvious evidence of injustice is wrongheaded and counterproductive.

I understand why people want to keep tallies. While some gender imbalances can be explained by individual or group preferences, the shortage of women in so many areas of public life has been allowed or ignored or tacitly excused for so long that it may take hard numbers to open people's eyes.

And there's something seductive about counting. We count sheep to fall asleep. We celebrate anniversaries and birthdays. We track stock prices. We log miles run and dollars spent. To count something is to see it, to understand it, to have the illusion of control over it.

But people who want to lose weight initially learn to count calories in order to recalibrate their perceptions about how to make healthy choices. The goal isn't a lifetime of squinting at labels. The goal is to develop a new set of habits and instincts, to make good decisions that feel natural and unforced. An occasional audit is vital, but continuous mortification can be crippling and wasteful. People who routinely go on about their diet rules — or worse, freely share their

thoughts about co-workers' lunch orders — are more likely to provoke resentment than to convert the reluctant. In the same way, the real work of recalibrating representation must be done privately and incrementally, one day at a time.

Counting is a form of mental labor, just like remembering when it's time to buy laundry soap or send out birthday invitations. As such, it is predominantly — though not exclusively — performed by women, who shoulder the mental load of tracking, fostering, supporting and promoting other women. Keeping those running tallies of gender imbalance is like other emotional labor: It's exhausting and distracts from more substantive work, and some people are skeptical it needs to be performed at all.

It can also be difficult to see the forest when you're busy counting the trees. Not every cracked glass ceiling is a victory. Recently, major newspapers trumpeted the fact that women hold all of the highest positions at the Central Intelligence Agency. The chief executives of four of the nation's five biggest military contractors are now women; Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics and the defense arm of Boeing all have #ladybosses. It's hard to imagine our feminist forebears seeing female dominance of the military-industrial complex as an unmixed blessing.

Gina Haspel is the C.I.A. director, and the agency's top three directorates are headed by women.
Sarah Silbiger/The New York Times

I'm a magazine editor, and when I have a story to assign, I shuffle writers' names around in a mental matrix of who is expert enough, dependable enough and affordable enough to get the job done. Gender is a consideration. It's not the primary one.

The idea that an outsider could look at my table of contents — as the byline counters at the group VIDA: Women in Literary Arts do, for instance — and decide whether I'd made those calculations correctly based purely on a gender tally seems presumptuous at best.

"Fifty percent gender parity is always something to strive for," a VIDA board member told me when I called to ask if there were situations that gender imbalance might be justified. The board member, Sarah Clark, was unwilling to give ground on the idea that sometimes the numbers won't even up, and that's O.K.

Later in our conversation, however, I found myself nodding along as I listened to what was essentially a strategic case for diversity — namely that "investing in building trust with readers who are women and who are nonbinary is an investment worth making."

That's exactly right. In journalism, and in moviemaking, it's natural to think about how to serve and expand your audience. Those who argue for diversity among our storytellers make the case that doing so ensures we capture a truer, fuller portrait of reality — which is fair enough.

But consider "Roma." If there is any justice in this world, it will win the Academy Award for best director on Sunday. This wrenching, beautiful film is set almost entirely in the world of women; it delicately engages class and race, stares unflinchingly at the darkness and light of motherhood, and yet it shows up on the wrong side of the gender ledgers: The director is Alfonso Cuarón, a man.

It is all the more troubling when the gender accountants are legislators or regulators with the power to do more than just name and shame. Technocrats on the right and left are quite certain they know all kinds of things: the right number of children to have, homes to own, degrees to obtain, pills to take, miles to drive, women to employ. Precise numerical goals create a false sense of clarity and certainty.

The absolute best way to ruin the gradual organic process of moving toward a society where men and women can both pursue the work they want — safely, with fair salaries and equal opportunities for promotion — is to freeze and polarize the conversation by imposing a bunch of rigid laws and policies. California passed a bill last fall that mandates the presence of at least one woman on the board of any publicly traded company headquartered there, with increases in that number under certain conditions.

“We are tired of being nice. We’re tired of being polite. We are going to require this because it’s going to benefit the economy,” said a co-author of the legislation, Hannah-Beth Jackson, a Democratic state senator from Santa Barbara, in a floor speech. This line of argumentation is typical, and baffling. Could it really be true that increasing female board representation is irrefutably good for business yet won’t happen unless companies are forced to do it right now?

In Norway, where a requirement for 40 percent female board membership became law in 2008, there’s some evidence that strict quotas may be counterproductive. Fewer companies chose to undertake initial public offerings in the period after the policy took effect and there was no measurable change in the affected companies’ performance or improvement in the prospects for women lower on the corporate hierarchy. In Kenya, lawmakers are debating a bill to enforce the so-called Two-Thirds Gender Rule, a constitutional clause prohibiting more than 66 percent of the legislature to be the same gender.

In the case of any kind of quota, there are obvious trade-offs between one category (gender) and others (race, sexual orientation, disability status among them) that arguably deserve more consideration. As usual, the law is a lagging indicator. Gender is easier (though not always easy!) to notice and tally in ways that other statuses aren’t. In a perfect world, there would never be a roomful of white men deciding whether to pick a woman instead of a person of color for a “diversity slot.” We do not live in a perfect world.

Underlying all of this is that there is something deeply off-putting about slotting people into categories by gender, about sussing out the precise nature of their genitals and their hearts before deciding if their presence on a masthead or a list of finalists is just.

Being a token woman or winning the women’s trophy is better than nothing. But it’s also reductive and demeaning. Our unease over this was reflected in the mockery Mitt Romney got for his “binders full of women.” Though the idea of a president carefully curating lists of women to hire for top-level positions (rather than, well, other activities) doesn’t seem so bad looking back, does it?

The courts grappled with the problems of quotas during the college admissions affirmative action wars of the 1990s. (Like most of America's wars, this conflict is continuing, but many people have stopped paying attention.) They settled on a compromise that does a shockingly good job of mirroring the way people actually function when left to their own devices. Hard quotas aren't permitted, but giving some consideration to balance and diversity is fine.

In the meantime, the powers that be at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences have actually laid the groundwork for sustainable improvements. They have tried to fix unbalanced inputs rather than mandating equal outputs. In 2018, they invited a record 928 new members, on top of 774 the year before, half of whom were women — up from 100 to 200 new additions in a normal year. As recently as 2014, Oscar voters were 76 percent male (as well as 94 percent white and on average 63 years old).

We're too far from parity for anyone to claim the current system is just. It's equally unclear that a 50/50 result is the only acceptable outcome.

On Oscar night this year, I will wince when only men are the nominees in some ostensibly coed categories. But I'm going to try my best to celebrate victories for women when they come and leave the counting to PricewaterhouseCoopers.

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A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 23, 2019, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Stop Counting Women