

## Case Study: Burkina Faso

# Burkina Faso: Recruiting Women for Legislative Elections

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As in the other countries of francophone Africa, women are under-represented in the power structures of Burkina Faso. This case study addresses the issue of women's political participation in Burkina Faso, and in particular their access to the national legislature and the recruitment of women candidates by political parties when elections to the legislature are approaching. It emphasizes the impact of the electoral system and quotas on women's representation, the stages of the recruitment process, and the constraints women face in being elected to the legislature.

### ***The Political Situation of Women***

The available information indicates that women have unequal access to parliamentary representation compared with men. From 1946 to 2002, according to the cumulative data, a total of 750 men and 23 women (3 percent) served as members of the legislature, varying with successive political systems. The May 2002 elections saw only a modest rise, as the number of women legislators went from ten to 13. The statistics highlight the fact that women remain a silent majority in Burkina Faso; more than half the population (52 percent) continues to be marginalized and excluded from decision-making positions. It is men who hold a monopoly on power, who decide on the major plans for society, and who determine the current course of the nation. Several factors explain this state of affairs.

### ***Influence of the Electoral System on Women***

During the 1992 legislative elections, Burkina Faso used the proportional system with closed lists based on the highest average. Those elections followed a long period of rule under a state of emergency marked by numerous outbreaks of political violence.

In such a context, women and men were afraid and reluctant to play an active role in the political life of the country. These elections offered a sort of apprenticeship in democracy to the citizens of Burkina Faso, who were hesitant to become involved. Few women stood as candidates in those elections, and as a result few were elected.

During the 1997 legislative elections, using the same electoral arrangements, women's organizations took action and pleaded their cause vis-à-vis the political decision makers and the party leaderships, calling for more women candidates and for the use of quotas. Most of the leading parties promised different quotas for women on their lists. This was the case of the majority party, the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CPD, Congress for Democracy and Progress) which pledged a 30 percent quota for women. Although this promise was informal and was not carried out to the letter, women fared better in the elections and a change had taken place.

In the context of the 2002 legislative elections, the proportional system remained in place, but this time based on the largest remainder. This system accords priority to closed lists, with two different lists per party, one regional and one national. However, the lobbying efforts by the women's organizations did not have the anticipated effects because of an ill-defined strategy. They demanded that all parties' lists include at least 25 percent women candidates. When the lists were published, however, women accounted for only 16 percent of the names on the national lists and less than 10 percent of the total on the national and regional lists, and there were major disparities between the different parties. As Yacouba Ouedraogo noted, 'With 39 candidates of a total of 222 hopefuls (i.e. 17.5 percent) in the 13 electoral regions, the Alliance pour la Démocratie et la Fédération/ Rassemblement des Démocrates Africains [ADF/RDA: Alliance for Democracy and Federation/African Democrats Coalition] went furthest in seeking to strike a gender balance'.<sup>1</sup> In the Front des Forces Sociales (FFS, Front of Social Forces) and the Coalition des Forces Démocratiques (CFD, Coalition of Democratic Forces), the ratio was 13 men to one woman, that is, women made up just over 7 percent of the candidates.

While the proportional list system may facilitate the promotion of women, its effects are not really felt unless the political parties have made the decision to promote women and place them on their lists in positions such that they have a chance of getting elected. Few parties nominate women, and they are generally placed at the bottom of the lists. An analysis of nominations of the five leading parties for the 2002 elections shows a very marked imbalance between the sexes. Women were largely relegated to the lists of alternate candidates; neither their number nor their positions on the lists yielded good results.

This situation is explained in part by the way the candidates were recruited to make up the parties' lists.

### ***The Recruitment of Women for the Political Parties' Lists***

Some 20 people (political leaders and candidates of both sexes) were interviewed during the legislative elections in 2002 for this case study. The interviews reveal that the selection of women was a function of five main criteria: the payment of a deposit; personal ties with a political leader; the need to attract female voters; the place of origin of the candidates; and finally their abilities.

*The payment of a deposit.* In order to register on a list of candidates, some contending parties required that nominees pay a deposit of more than 3,500,000 CFA francs. Such a sum is not possible for the vast majority of women who would be willing to run for office. Very often, women whose experience and skills would qualify them to run are ruled out because they lack the financial means to meet this requirement. The financial problem is thus the first barrier women candidates face, because many political parties do not pay the deposit required of candidates.

*Personal ties to a party leader.* Frequently, family or friendship ties with certain party leaders have been the catalyst for women's being recruited to political groupings. Certain parties whose recruitment is based on ethnicity or region, or those whose financial base is limited, go to their women friends or allies to draw up their lists of candidates. In such cases, women join political parties without the proper preparation and without any experience.

Often they are used to replace elected women who have started to become autonomous and independent of their male supporters in the political sphere. Thus, some women who are totally unknown in the public sphere are selected to run for seats without any previous experience, rather than more experienced women who have held elective office. Some women who had been elected in the past stated that this was the reason why they were not nominated to run for the 2002 legislative elections. This kind of selection criterion is unclear, changeable and a deterrent for those women who are interested in seeking a party nomination.

Yet, while this kind of recruitment can give politically inexperienced women a chance, it can also make these same women victims, that is, they are subject to the changing motivations of their backer. Many women who were elected in the past state that they have been cast aside after changes in the ties with their supporters or because of the power or leadership struggle between male party leaders. With this form of recruitment, the placement of women in the parties, and their tenure, are all subjected to the personal ties and interests of certain political leaders. The latter's personal preferences replace objective criteria.

This practice on the part of political leaders raises some questions about their perception of the citizenship of women in the country and the meaning of democracy. As Naila Kabear points out, Burkina Faso was colonized and the idea of citizenship which means that individuals are the bearers of rights has not yet taken root in society.<sup>2</sup> The notion of equality which is central to the idea of citizenship and democracy is

still a vague word, because men and women are not considered equal in rights when it comes to competition for elective office.

*The need to attract the female electorate.* The percentage of females in the population of Burkina Faso (52 percent) is reason enough for the parties to try to attract the women's vote during elections. Thanks to the network of women's organizations, women are easier to mobilize for campaign rallies and balloting, and go to the polling places in larger numbers. Women are often labelled 'electoral cattle'. Mindful of the weight of the women's vote in election results, the political parties have included some women candidates to lure this female electorate. Unfortunately, too many women have yet to become conscious of their electoral potential.

*Candidates' place of origin.* The division of the national territory into 13 electoral regions for the 2002 legislative elections forced the political parties to recruit candidates from these different regions in order to attract the local electorate. This approach meant that some women, who enjoy a certain level of socio-economic power, registered in regions for which there were few male candidates. In such cases, parties did not seek candidates because of their competence, but instead nominated women who had leverage, either regionally or nationally.

*The candidates' qualifications.* In Burkina Faso, several women intellectuals have emerged as a group; they have been inspired by the political context to master the art of participation in politics. These women joined different parties depending on their personal political convictions in some cases, or were sought out by the leadership of the major parties because of their qualifications in other cases. Women leading national women's organizations were encouraged to participate because of their ability to mobilize the female electorate. This trend is embryonic, and involves only a minority of well-to-do women intellectuals. The party leaders who really make qualifications a criterion in choosing women candidates for their lists are still few and far between. Accordingly, even though the change that has begun may have an impact on the quality of women's representation in future, it still needs to be consolidated.

Other information suggests that subjective criteria often prevail when it comes to recruiting women to the political parties' electoral lists. In his article, Yacouba Ouedraogo further notes that one woman candidate has denounced 'the senseless reasons given for excluding women from public office'. The candidate added that often the only reason invoked for not giving a woman a place on a list is the fact that she is not a man.

In general, the selection of candidates for the parties' lists has been disputed by several contenders (men and women), as testified to by the highly-publicized conflicts provoked by this procedure. The political weight of the candidates within the parties is determined by their placement on the party lists. In this context, the promoters of women candidates have limited room for manoeuvre to defend their own position and those of their 'protégées' vis-à-vis dissatisfied male colleagues. The problems related to candidate selection are among the causes of women's weak representation on the party lists.

## ***Lessons Learned***

The influence of the electoral system on the recruitment of women cannot yet be discerned in the context of Burkina Faso. Several other factors appear to be more important, such as the selection and positioning of candidates on the electoral lists. This is influenced by clientelism, allegiance to the parties, and power struggles between political leaders, creating unstable alliances.

Without a solid network of women's groups there can be little influence on the nomination and selection criteria and the political parties' procedures to press for increased female representation and participation. Advocacy and lobbying activities conducted to promote a higher proportion of women in winnable positions on party lists have had only limited impact because of inadequate advocacy and lobbying strategies.

The political culture of Burkina Faso does not as yet allow for the selection of candidates in a democratic manner. Political immaturity is expressed in the lack of clear criteria for choosing candidates to elected office. The rules of conduct are not sufficiently clear or respected by the political leadership.

The political parties do not respect their pledges to implement quotas for women's participation. There is no pressure on them to do so insofar as women's groups are not well organized in their advocacy activities.

In general, young women (with or without schooling) are not socialized to participate equally in politics. In many cases they do not have the experience needed to be able to claim leadership. They still need much more support from male political leaders in order to gain access to and influence in the political arena.

The place and the role of women in the political parties affect their access to government posts. Only one of the 48 official recognized political parties is led by a woman, and the leadership of the major parties is still the exclusive domain of men. Women are rarely active members of the parties, which makes it difficult for them to reach leadership positions. In general, their membership is controlled by men (relatives or friends) who choose them and back them in line with their own interests. In these conditions, the risk is that the commitment of some women who are politically active may not be the result of their own individual decisions and motivations.

The way women are recruited in many instances deprives them of autonomy. The alliances and allegiance to their backers have resulted in tokenism rather than activism. Many women feel insecure, which hinders them from defending their ideals and political programmes as representatives of a particular social group with specific interests.

## ***Challenges***

The contemporary challenges women face in increasing their representation in the National Assembly include:

- gaining political knowledge and experience;
- building a solid network of women's groups and creating strategic alliances;
- mobilizing and involving large numbers of qualified women of all ages in active politics;
- enabling women to exercise full citizenship equal to that of men;
- changing the role and enhancing the position of women within the leadership bodies of the political parties;
- influencing the nomination and selection of candidates (men and women) on electoral lists; and
- mobilizing or gaining access to financial resources (especially state allocation to parties) to fund their electoral activities.

### **Strategies**

On the basis of the above, several strategies are recommended to increase women's representation.

**Building a solid and inclusive network to promote women's political participation.** Without an active and sustained pressure group, there is no doubt that women's political participation will not increase as quickly as desired. However, divisions and conflicts between women's groups result in a lack of solidarity regarding this goal. Women have to find a way to build a solid and inclusive network to support women's candidacies and develop a common voice with specific interests and political agendas. Being supported by grass-roots associations and collectives is a means to help women candidates overcome their sense of insecurity and become politically empowered.

**Lobbying for formal quotas and control.** For many years, political parties have lured women with promises regarding the implementation of informal quotas. However, in practice they were not implemented, and the introduction of formal legal quotas, with a placement mandate for women to be placed in winnable positions, should be considered.

**Increasing knowledge about politics.** For more effective political participation, women must have their own political opinions; they need to be able to express them clearly and in a relevant manner, and they must be able to discern the differences between the orientations and programmes of the political parties. They should be able to grasp the stakes and the rules of the political game, and master the abstract and specialized language used in political debate. Thus training is needed to meet the immense needs of women at these different levels.

The civic education of female students in primary and secondary schools is also useful for forming a contingent of women who are well versed in political issues. Education and learning through political action from a young age should help raise the civic consciousness of girls and encourage them to participate in the political

parties at the grass-roots level so as to gain access to positions of authority in leadership structures later.

**Mobilizing and involving large numbers of women in active politics.** Women need to be mobilized to articulate their specific needs, insights and motivations in order to allow for the emergence of leaders who are capable of expressing the points of view of the hitherto-silent half of society. Supported from grass-roots associations and collectives is a means to help women candidates overcome their sense of insecurity and become politically empowered.

**Setting up a fund to support women's political participation.** If the most qualified women are excluded from becoming candidates because of their poverty, creating a fund to support women's political participation is one of the strategies needed if the best-qualified women are to emerge in national politics.

This case study has shown that a variety of factors influence the recruitment of women as candidates for election. The electoral system therefore has less influence than in other established democracies which use proportional representation. To be better represented in the legislature, women must mobilize, gain the skills needed, and receive financial support from, if possible, a special support fund. Finally, a law imposing a minimum quota of women candidates is also proposed to overcome the challenges of candidate selection by the political parties.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ouedraogo, Yacouba, 2002. 'La palme de la misogynie au FFS et à la CFD' [The prize for misogyny goes to the FFS and the CFD]. *Journal Le Pays*. No. 2604, p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Kabeer, Naila, 2002. 'Citizenship, Affiliation and Exclusion: Perspective from the South'. *IDS Bulletin*. Vol. 33, no. 2.