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CASE STUDY

Burkina Faso: Obstacles to Women's Participation in the Legislature

Alice Tiendrébéogo-Kaboret

Despite numerous statements made by the government of Burkina Faso, on various occasions, about the need to further involve women in the conduct of public affairs, women's political participation is still limited. Women's participation in the national legislature is hindered by numerous obstacles, including the dominant patriarchal ideology, the nature of the political parties, and the socio-economic structures.

In the face of this situation, the government of Burkina Faso has developed an impressive institutional and legal framework to increase women's representation. This is found in the 1991 Constitution, which enshrines the equality of women and men, and the Code on the Individual and the Family. Recognition of women's parental authority is a major gain.

Similarly, women who hold positions of responsibility in political parties and civil society organizations have mobilized to expand the number of women in local government councils and in the national legislature. Nonetheless, for the time being, these strategies have had only a limited impact. Other actions must be undertaken to resolve the problem of women's under-representation, including a review of the electoral code and designing communication strategies among women themselves. This case study highlights the current situation of women in Burkina Faso, identifies some of the issues at stake, and suggests strategies to improve the situation.

Context and Current Situation

Burkina Faso has been independent since 1960. Universal suffrage was obtained in 1956, and women became involved very early on in politics, especially as an auxiliary force in the anti-colonial struggles. Burkina Faso has had four constitutions between 1960 and 1991, all of which accorded equal political rights to men and women. Nonetheless, from 1966 to 1991 the country was ruled for long periods by military juntas that came to power through coups, interrupted by multiparty elections held in 1977, 1992 and 1997. The national legislature, which was bicameral until January 2002, now operates as a single chamber, known as the National Assembly (*Assemblée nationale*).

The population of Burkina Faso is estimated to be approximately 12 million of which 51.8 per cent are women. A former French colony, Burkina Faso gained independence in 1960. Women won the right to universal suffrage in 1956, with the adoption of the Framework Law (Loi Cadre). Nonetheless, women's access to the legislature has been slow in coming and has continued to be limited after independence: just one woman was elected in 1977, four were elected in 1992 (3.7%), 10 in 1997 (9.0%), and 11 in 2002 (9.9%).

With regard to the powerful positions in the national legislature, it was not until 1992 that it decided that the office of deputy speaker (vice-president) of the Assembly should be held by a woman (except between 1999 and 2000). It was not until 2000 that a woman assumed the position of chairperson of a legislative committee, when one was designated to chair the Committee on Employment and Social and Cultural Affairs.

The situation of women in Burkina Faso in the decision-making process was very marginal until the democratic and popular revolution of 1983. Until then, women did not even have the right to take the floor in public assemblies in the villages. The 1983 revolution sought to accord women a privileged place, and they were to be involved at all levels, that is, design, decision, and implementation.

Article 12 of the 1991 Constitution, notes that “all Burkinabés, without distinctions of any kind, have the right to participate in the management of the affairs of government and society. Accordingly, they have the right to vote and to seek elected office, in the conditions provided for by law.” The electoral codes have no legal barrier whatsoever impeding women from active participation in the political parties, from voting, or from seeking elected office.

From 1960 to 2002, the percentage of women cabinet ministers slowly surpassed 10 per cent. Yet even when holding government posts, women are often excluded from the strategic ministries. There have been short-lasting exceptions in the ministries of finance, budget, justice and the civil service. Moreover, some women have been appointed to serve as provincial high-commissioners. Today, women hold this post in three provinces of Burkina Faso. At the local level, the process whereby women gain access to elected office has been slow-moving, yet commitments have been made regarding the equality of the sexes, as one election law provides that henceforth there will be three members of the local government councils instead of two, the idea being that at least one should be a woman.

Despite the political will reiterated time and again, and the determination of women, a certain number of factors continue to hinder women’s access to the National Assembly.

The Main Challenges

Traditional democratic legal decisions are not enough to afford women access to the national legislature. Other considerations come into play, such as the parliamentary structure and the practices of the political parties, illiteracy and poverty.

In the socio-cultural traditions of Burkina Faso, women are most often perceived to be inferior to men. Numerous women themselves are convinced they do not have the right to participate in public decision-making; instead they conform to “virtues” such as obedience and submission. For the most part, they perceive politics as the exclusive purview of men.

These trends also appear in the domestic sphere, where the upbringing of girls in the family most often teaches them to be submissive and passive. This conduct is reinforced in schools, where the knowledge transmitted in programmes and by literacy learning is limited to the domestic sphere; only to a very limited extent do they deal with the socio-economic and cultural determinants that have a negative impact on women’s lives, such as working conditions, long-standing beliefs, poverty, and powerlessness. Moreover, the sexual division of labour confines most women to domestic and child-rearing tasks, which are very constraining, leaving them no time to devote to political action. Politics has become synonymous with values and practices that women find so alienating and distasteful that they prefer to be excluded from it. Marked by antagonism and confrontation, the political world is perceived by most women as a male world. Once elected to the legislature, women find no support network for politically active women, and so, while there has been only modest progress, women’s political action is still subject to criticism by the general public. This is why many women in Burkina Faso prefer to invest themselves in the realm of women’s associations, which they find less risky.

In addition to the patriarchal nature of the parties is women’s low level of education and weak financial position.

Political parties and the electoral system are still the major obstacles to broader women’s participation in the political life and government of Burkina Faso. Very few women gain access to leadership positions in the parties, and no mechanisms exist to increase the number of women elected. The proportional electoral system using lists, now in use in Burkina Faso, is considered to have favoured women’s access to elected office in many countries. Since voters cast their ballots for parties and not for individual candidates, the political parties, through their decisions as to the composition of their lists, have the power to designate who will occupy the legislative seats they win. Nonetheless, in Burkina Faso, most of the time women are placed towards the end of the list, and therefore have practically no chance of being elected.

Moreover, as the electoral code in Burkina Faso does not provide for independent candidacies, one must be nominated by one of the political parties. In this context, they run up against many problems related to patriarchal traditions and attitudes. For example, traditionally women leave their families when they are married. This limits their chance of running for office in their province of origin. Yet in her husband’s province a woman is considered an outsider, and so has no chance of being selected as a candidate.

Education also affects women’s access to the National Assembly. In Burkina Faso, only 34 per cent of girls have access to schooling, while 85 per cent of the women are illiterate. Women often lack self-confidence; they are less prepared for political struggle than men, who are better-educated and better-informed. Their capacities to carry out several of the tasks demanded of elected representatives, such as reading legislation and communicating with others, are limited. In addition, by law one must have a clean criminal record to be a member of the national legislature, and although there is no literacy requirement in the law to hold office; literacy is an unwritten requirement used to exclude women from

parliament.

Finally, the lack of resources is another obstacle. Political clientelism requires considerable revenue, which women often lack. They are therefore perceived as candidates who potentially draw fewer voters than men. A measure of economic independence, which contributes to the personal autonomy essential for making political choices, and even more so the choice to stand as a candidate, is therefore key for women.

Possible Solutions

In order to overcome certain obstacles to women's political participation, changes must be initiated simultaneously from above, by the state, and from below, by civil society and the associations. Women's political participation is one of the issues to be included among the changes brought about in the process of democratization under way in Burkina Faso.

Institutional, legislative, and associational measures are needed for women to make up for the difference.

The government has put in place the following institutions to address various challenges:

- A Ministry for the Promotion of Women was established in 1997. Through a triennial action plan, covering 1998 to 2000, this ministry placed emphasis on four priority lines of action, including fighting poverty, developing female human resources, promoting the fundamental rights of women and girls, fighting all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and advocacy and social mobilization on behalf of a positive image of women.
- A National Committee to Combat Discrimination Against Women (CONALDIS) has been established. It is made up of representatives from the ministries involved in the areas of women's rights, non-governmental organizations and local associations. Its mission is to monitor the effective implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and to draw up a report every four years. For the time being, the Ministry for the Promotion of Women has only limited financial, organizational and human resources. CONALDIS has only consultative power.
- An Observatory on the Living Conditions of Women has been established. The idea of this observatory grew out of discussions with NGOs and local associations around preparation of the action plan of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women. This independent agency was to examine the situation of women's rights and report on their implementation; unfortunately, it does not appear to be operative.

The population in general, and women in particular, are unaware of the commitments the government has made by ratifying certain conventions. It is important to make these texts and their content known and understood, and to fight poverty and attain sustainable human development. Finally, it is essential to achieve better coordination of women's associations and NGOs in order to do a better job making their voices heard. Among the international and regional instruments that the Government of Burkina Faso has ratified are the following:

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights grew out of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They provide that civil and political rights derive from the dignity inherent to all members of the human family, and that every citizen has the right and the opportunity, without discrimination, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely-chosen representatives.
- The government has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which lists the different inalienable rights of women, and prescribes for the member states the actions to be undertaken to ensure respect for the exercise of those rights. In addition, through Articles 7 and 8, the Convention guarantees women the right to vote, to hold public office on equal terms with men, and the right to represent their governments internationally.
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted by the Organization of African Unity in 1981, also provides for women's rights. It affirms the principle of equality and non-discrimination, and specifically mentions eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.

These are excellent legal instruments around which women involved in politics or civil society issues have mobilized, first of all to make them known through popular education campaigns, and then to demand of the government that it comply with them. Among the many associations that have worked along these lines, one can cite the National Advocacy Network, Promo femmes-développement, and the Association of Women Jurists of Burkina Faso.

Secondly, women's organizations have engaged in advocacy for greater participation of women in politics. These organizations include the Convention of Women in Politics, the Association of Women in Elected Office, the National Advocacy Network, Promo femmes-développement, the Project on Women's Law and Citizenship, and the National Coalition of Burkina Faso.

These associations have also organized workshops to train women in the exercise of political responsibility. In this context, in May 2000, the National Coalition of Burkina Faso has appealed to the National Assembly to ensure conditions for the effective participation of women in town management. It proposed the following:

- Use the law on public financing of the political parties as an effective instrument for women's promotion, by according priority to those political parties who nominate more women candidates.
- Accept the possibility of independent candidacies, which could result in more women candidates.¹

Yet these measures and actions are insufficient. The government must make courageous decisions, especially to examine the possibility of imposing a quota of women on the parties' electoral lists, as a medium-term goal. It would also be well-advised to study the effects of the different counting methods on the political representation of women in the elected bodies, so as to consider, if necessary, adjusting or modifying the electoral system.

The political parties should also commit themselves to designating more women to their decision-making bodies. These bodies could also be specially charged with promoting women within the party, reviewing the structures and procedures with a view to removing the obstacles that directly or indirectly hinder women's participation. They would also see to it that a quota of women is respected, and that they are placed on the lists in positions such that they could potentially get elected.

For their part, women activists and women with responsibility in politics may become more aware of their civil rights. To this end, it will be necessary to integrate citizen education in all literacy and training programmes, and to develop new advocacy strategies.

An advocacy campaign was organized to target the political parties participating in the 5 May 2002 legislative elections. The goal of this campaign was to have 40 per cent women candidates, and to lead to women being positioned in electable positions on the lists. Yet in reality, all the parties, including the majority party, which had accepted the principle of a quota on the order of 25 per cent at its 1999 party congress, had less than 20 per cent women on their lists.

A Three-fold Responsibility: The State, Women in Elected Office and the Associations

In order for there to be more women in the national legislature, synergy is needed among the government, the deputies, and the women's organizations. The state has a major role to play because public authority is vested in it – it has the political, legislative, judicial and economic power to make all the decisions capable of promoting women's rights.

Legislative measures will only have a real impact if they are supported by economic, social and cultural changes that affect the majority of women in the city and the countryside and that enable them to rise above the situation of subordination in which they find themselves. The state is the first interlocutor for women's organizations, but they should not be content merely to send in recommendations and express pious vows. They must go further, taking action to provide information and raise awareness.

Women elected to the legislature also have a major responsibility. They must work to become more visible, play their constitutional role, and answer to women's expectations. Their actions should highlight the responsibility of women in national legislatures. To this end, their initiatives should be supported from below by the women's associations. The participation of women in decision-making processes in Burkina Faso does not depend solely on implementing laws, but on women's capacity to define themselves as citizens who are endowed with capabilities and autonomy, to mobilize, and to negotiate with men.

Endnotes

1. Coalition nationale du Burkina Faso, 2000.

References and Further Reading

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