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CASE STUDY

Recruiting Women for the Legislative Elections in Burkina Faso

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As in the other countries of French-speaking 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, in particular their access to the national legislature and the recruitment of women candidates by political parties when legislative elections 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, as well as the specificity of the history, political culture, and socio-economic context of Burkina Faso.

Political Situation of Women

The information collected on the representation of men and women in the parliament indicate unequal access based on sex. From 1946 to 2000, according to the cumulative data, a total of 750 men and 23 women (3%) served as members of the legislature. In Burkina Faso's modern history, these rates have varied with the successive political systems.

While the colonial period and the first years of independence were marked by the very limited presence of women in leadership bodies, the revolutionary period (1983–1987) was characterized by a more pronounced opening. Women gained access to high-level posts hitherto occupied by men (minister of finance, minister of public works, etc.). With five women cabinet ministers, the last government of the National Revolutionary Council, which lasted only two months, had the largest number of women.

With the bolstering the process of democratization that began in the early 1990s, the proportion of women elected had increased significantly by 2001. In the 1992 legislative elections, four women were elected (3.7%) to the National Assembly, compared to 103 men. In the Assembly elected in 1997, the number of women had climbed to 10, as compared to 101 men, that is, a gain of approximately 150 per cent in relation to the previous legislature. Yet the May 2002 elections saw only a very modest rise, as the number of women legislators went from 10 to 11.

The statistics highlight the fact that women remain a silent majority in Burkina Faso; more than half the population (52%) 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 Systems 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. 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 the results were therefore limited.

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. They even called for quotas. Some parties promised a quota of 30 per cent women candidates. This was the case of the majority party, the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP: Congress for Democracy and Progress). Though this promise was not carried out to the letter, women fared better in the elections – 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. The arguments by the women's organizations did not have the effects anticipated. They demanded that the lists include at least 25 per cent women candidates. When the lists were published, women accounted for only 16 per cent of the candidates on the national lists and less than 10 per cent of the total on the national and regional lists. There was a major disparity among the different parties. "With 39 candidates of a total of 222 hopefuls (i.e. 17.5%) in the 13 electoral regions, the ADF/RDA went furthest in seeking to strike a gender balance".¹ In the Front des forces sociales (FFS: Front of Social Forces) and the Coalition des forces démocratiques (CFD: Coalition of Democratic Forces), the ratio is 13 men to one woman, that is, women accounted for 7.5 per cent of the candidates.

Elections by proportional lists facilitate the promotion of women only to the extent the political parties have chosen this political option.

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 the women 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 are often 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 are recruited to make up the parties' lists.

The Recruitment of Women for the Political Parties' Lists

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

The payment of a surety

In order to register on a list of candidates, one of the contending parties has required of its candidates that they post a surety in the amount 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 surety required of candidates.

Personal ties to a party leader

Frequently, family or friendship ties with certain party leaders have been the catalyst for their recruitment to the 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. Certain candidates for the 2002 legislative elections state that they were nominated by chance.

Yet while this kind of recruitment can give women inexperienced in politics a chance, it can also make these same women victims, subject to the changing motivations of their backer. Many women elected in the past, state that they have been cast aside after changes in their family situation or in the affective choices of their party leaders. With this form of recruitment, the recruitment and placement of women in the parties, and whether they stay, are all subjected to the personal ties and interests of certain political leaders. Their personal preferences take the place of objective criteria.

The need to draw the female electorate

The percentage of females in the population of Burkina Faso (52% of the total population) is reason enough for the parties to try to draw 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 sometimes labelled "electoral cattle." Mindful of the weight of the women's vote in election results, the political parties have included some women candidates to impress this female electorate. Unfortunately, too many women have yet to become conscious of the female vote, and do not accord importance to the fact that the different parties are taking into account their interests.

Geography

The division of the national territory into 13 electoral regions for the 2002 legislative elections forces the political parties to recruit candidates from these different regions in order to attract the local electorate. This approach to recruiting has led some women to register in the regional lists for which there were few male candidates. In such cases, parties do not seek candidates who are politically competent, but women who enjoy a certain level of socio-economic power in the region or nationally.

The candidates' qualifications

In Burkina Faso, several women intellectuals have emerged as a group; they have been led by their political culture to learn about the national political scene. These women may join different parties depending on their personal political convictions, or may even be sought out by the leadership of the major parties because of their qualifications. Women in charge of national women's organizations are also sought out because of their ability to mobilize the female electorate. This trend is embryonic and recent, and involves just a minority of well-to-do women intellectuals. The party leaders who really make qualifications a criteria 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 the 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. One woman candidate has denounced "the senseless reasons given for excluding women from public office."² She adds that often the only reason invoked for 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 inclusion on the party lists. In this context, the backers of women candidates have limited room for maneuver to defend their own interests and those of their "protégées" vis-à-vis dissatisfied male colleagues. The problem of selecting candidates from the much larger pool of aspirants is, therefore, a cause of the weak representation of women on the 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 in the selection and positioning of candidates on the electoral lists. Relationships of clientelism and allegiance within the parties as well as power struggles create unstable alliances; this dynamic works against women.
- The political culture of Burkina Faso is not yet sufficiently anchored to favour practices for choosing candidates that are in line with the democratic spirit. 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 sufficiently respected by the political leaders to allow women to participate fully in the dynamics of democracy.
- Women are rarely introduced to politics when young. In general, young women (with or without schooling) are not raised to participate in politics. It is as adults that women begin to be sought out by the parties. In many cases, they do not have the experience needed to be able to claim leadership. This lack of political culture at the individual level disqualifies them in relation to the better-informed male contenders. Accordingly, they still need much more backing from male political leaders in order to gain entry into politics.

In Burkina Faso, only one of the 48 officially recognized political parties is led by a woman. The leadership of the major parties is still the exclusive domain of men.

- The place and the role of women in the political parties affects their access to government posts. In Burkina Faso, just one of the 48 official recognized political parties is led by a woman. 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 commitment of most of the women in active political life is not the result of their own individual decision, and is not motivated by their personal convictions.

The way women are recruited deprives them of autonomy and freedom to act as they please. The alliances and allegiance to their backers lead some women to hold office as tokens, rather than standing out in politics for their position on

behalf of women, for they are more concerned with preserving their relationships. Any attempt to assume autonomy and every initiative are perceived as endangering or offending their backers or their male colleagues, who are then ready to exclude them. Accordingly, they feel insecure, which hinders them from defending their ideals and political programmes.

The Contemporary Challenges Women Face, and Priority Strategies

Women must face up to many challenges in order to resolve the problem of their under-representation in the National Assembly. Women appear to be according priority to five of them:

1. Gaining political knowledge and experience;
2. Mobilizing and involving large numbers of women of all ages in active politics;
3. Getting women to exercise their citizenship autonomously;
4. Including women in the leadership bodies of the political parties; and
5. Gaining access to financing to fund their electoral activities.

Several strategies may be used to increase women's representation, depending on the problems identified.

Mobilizing and involving large numbers of women of all ages in active politics

Women need to be mobilized as individuals with specific grievances and motivations in order to allow for the emergence of leaders capable of expressing the points of view of the hitherto-silent half of society. The fact of women candidates being proposed by grass-roots associations and collectives will help them overcome the sense of insecurity that currently affects women. By winning the support of a particular group women can become politically empowered.

Training women in political responsibility and the civic education of young women

The lack of political experience appears to be a major reason why women do not participate in politics in Burkina Faso. For more effective political participation, women must have their own political opinions, they need to be able to express them in terms adapted to the meaning they assign to their practices, and they must be able to recognize the differences among the tendencies 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 well-versed in political issues. Civic education and learning through political action from a young age should help raise the civic conscience of girls and lead them to get involved in the political parties at the grass-roots level so as to later gain access to positions of authority in their leadership structures.

Creating 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 for the best-qualified women to emerge in national politics.

Mobilize, gain the skills, and receive financial aid

This case study has shown that the electoral system has less influence on the recruitment of women than other factors and other political practices that are not always in keeping with the democratic spirit. Most women in politics have been recruited at the discretion of the political party leaders, making them dependent and insecure, and therefore limiting their power and their autonomy. To be better-represented in the National Assembly, women must mobilize, gain the skills needed, and receive financial support from a special support fund. Finally, a law imposing a minimum quota of women candidates is among the solutions that should be studied.

Endnotes

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1. Journal Le Pays. No. 2604. p.3
 2. Journal Le Pays. No. 2604. p.3