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CASE STUDY

Quotas in Francophone Africa: Modest Beginnings

Aissata De Diop

A certain democratic deficit persists in contemporary societies due to the under-representation of women in public and political life. Indeed, the struggle of women continues to be difficult, even though various strategies have been adopted by states, the international community, and lobby groups to address women's concerns.

Some countries have made significant gains towards attaining parity in representation. Most notable is France, which amended its Constitution in June 1999, to read: "French law favours equal access of women and men to electoral mandates and elective office."¹ With this change in the Constitution, French parliamentarians now have the means to put parity into practice.

However, the situation of women in the process of social change continues to be remarkably paradoxical. While women's emancipation is moving forward in the private and public spheres (many families are becoming more democratic, many women have a say in democracy and are present in almost all sectors of production), they are still absent in management positions and in representative institutions like legislatures, especially in Africa.

Yet women no longer want to be limited to the role of voters. They are taking various initiatives to improve their representation in decision-making, especially in political decision-making. The issues of the quota system and parity, as direct and swift means of addressing the under-representation of women, have been raised repeatedly. This case study will describe the situation of women in African legislatures, with special emphasis on Senegal. It will provide an overview of the status of quotas, evaluating the prospects for implementing quotas in francophone Africa.

Women in African Legislatures

Since 1987, most African countries have made some progress in terms of women's representation in parliaments,² yet data published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union reveals that in 2002 the percentage of women in African parliaments was still low. The average for sub-Saharan Africa is 12.8 per cent in the lower chambers, slightly below the world average of 14.5 per cent.³

In sub-Saharan Africa, six countries have percentages of women parliamentarians ranging from 20 per cent to 30 per cent: Seychelles, Uganda, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Mozambique. Four of these countries now rank among the top 20 worldwide in terms of women's representation. In most of these countries, however, the rate of women's representation has historically been very low. In South Africa, with the abolition of apartheid, the number of women in politics has increased sharply, from 2.4 per cent before democratization to 29.8 per cent in 2002. In both South Africa and Mozambique (30.0%), the adoption of informal quotas by the parties in power has been largely responsible for the jump in women's representation. Few other African countries have implemented such a quota system. Eleven countries have rates varying from 10 per cent to 20 per cent: Angola, Botswana, Cape Verde, Congo, Eritrea, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The percentage of women in parliament in Zimbabwe dropped 4 per cent after the June 2000 legislative elections. Slight progress has been noted in Botswana, Zambia and Senegal after their latest elections. The conditions under which elections are organized may also influence women's representation. Electoral violence and intimidation often constitute another obstacle.

Women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in a large number of African countries, including the following francophone countries: Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger and Togo.

In Swaziland, Nigeria, Burundi, Cameroon, and Guinea-Bissau, there was clear backsliding in the political representation of women from 1987 to 2000.⁴ Djibouti is one of the few countries in the world with no women in the legislature. In these countries, the development of democratic institutions is limited. Socio-cultural obstacles and conflicts are among the factors accounting for this under-representation of women.

Women are severely under-represented in many African countries. In North Africa, Tunisia has the highest representation, with 11.5 per cent women parliamentarians. In the other countries, women account for less than 5 per cent of legislators. These include Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, with 3.4 per cent, 2.4 per cent, and 0.6 per cent, respectively. In general, in all the African countries, the use of quotas may be a potentially useful mechanism for increasing the representation of women in the legislatures.

Table 5. Women in legislatures, francophone Africa, March 2002

Country	(%)
Rwanda	25.7
Seychelles	23.5
Senegal	19.2
Mali	12.2
Congo	12.0
Tunisia	11.5
Cape Verde	11.1
Burkina Faso (May 2002)	9.9
Gabon	9.2
São Tomé e Príncipe	9.1
Republic of Guinea	8.8
Ivory Coast	8.5
Madagascar	8.0
Guinea-Bissau	7.8
Central African Republic	7.3
Benin	6.0
Mauritius	5.7
Cameroon	5.6
Equatorial Guinea	5.0
Togo	4.9
Algeria	3.4
Chad	2.4
Egypt	2.4
Niger	1.2
Morocco	0.6
Djibouti	0.0
Burundi	n.d
Comoros	n.d
Mauritania	n.d
Democratic Republic of the Congo	n.d

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org>.

Only two countries have more than 20 per cent women's representation in the parliaments of francophone Africa. This limited representation of women is because of various socioeconomic and cultural factors. Women often find it difficult to reconcile family life with the demands of the patriarchal system found in many countries; similarly, they lack the support, especially financial backing, of the political parties. Women legislators often lack the technical competence or financial resources needed to successfully discharge their mandate. In contrast to the francophone countries, the political parties of several Anglophone countries have chosen to adopt quota systems to address this situation.

To improve the representation of women, many countries have launched awareness-raising and advocacy activities including organizing training workshops on the issues of political governance and the dissemination of related information. Some non-governmental organizations have directed their efforts to political parties, the media, and political actors, calling their attention to the need for quality representation, and more representation, of women in decision-making positions.

Despite this level of mobilization, the proportion of women in these African countries' legislatures is still low, and implementing quotas might offer a solution. What are the experiences of other African parliaments with regard to quotas, and which strategies, could the francophone African countries adopt to establish quotas while respecting the philosophy of their constitutions?

Quotas through National Legislation

Most of the Latin American countries as well as Eritrea, Namibia, Uganda, and the United

Republic of Tanzania, in Africa, have adopted national or local quotas in their legislation. In Africa, the quotas range from 13 per cent to 25 per cent.

In Africa, the summary of national reports on the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Action Platforms published by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) after the Sixth African Regional Conference in November 1999⁵ describes the quotas adopted by some countries, mostly with common-law systems, as a way of involving women

in decision-making positions. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) declaration recommends that 30 per cent of seats in the legislatures of the member states should be held by women by 2005.

Some francophone countries are intending to carry out advocacy campaigns to press for quotas through political consultations, with the aim of including women on electoral lists. However, francophone Africa appears to be more supportive of quotas as a matter of political party policy than quotas established through national legislation. The issue is highly contentious, as reflected in the contrasting views on the matter espoused by the different parties.

Quotas through Political Parties

Some political parties affiliated with the Socialist International (a network of parties claiming the socialist heritage, including FRELIMO in Mozambique) have adopted a quota system for their lists of candidates to ensure the presence of women in leadership positions. This system is applied in different ways, for example, alternating women and men on the parties' lists of candidates.

In Senegal, women's representation stands at nearly 20 per cent in 2002. The informal quotas adopted by some parties partly account for this figure. For example, the Socialist Party (PS) has set a quota of 25 per cent, in keeping with the provisions of the Socialist International. During the nominations for the May 1998 legislative elections, two-thirds of the coordinating committees of the Socialist Party applied the quota. Others went beyond it.⁶ Some rural communities even achieved parity, while in others not a single woman was nominated. The nominations oversight committee has undertaken to assure that women were ranked on proportional lists according to this provision. However, there is resistance to implementing these measures systematically. Some argue that this is due to either the lack of the required skills or the lack of women candidates. But very few parties have training programmes to bolster women's political capacities.

Some parties have hinted at adopting a quota during elections, but this has not happened. In other political parties, women rejected the principle of quotas, but pressured their leadership to be nominated and to be well-ranked on the lists. Another party stated that it was "suspicious of artificial measures like quotas."⁷ Even so, one of its lists included some women.

Senegal has chosen a mixed system combining representation by proportional list voting and by constituency elections. A study of how women were nominated during the 1998 legislative elections in Senegal⁸ reveals that the percentage of women nominated on the national (proportional) lists ranged from 13 per cent to 50 per cent. The highest percentages were in political parties not represented in the National Assembly.⁹ However, far fewer women were elected in constituencies than through the political party lists.

With the change in government in Senegal after the April 2001 legislative elections, women held on to their percentage of representation, and even increased it slightly from 14 per cent to 19.2 per cent (the reduction in the number of seats in the legislature may explain some of this gain). However, the Senegalese Democratic Party, which had more women elected than any other, has yet to adopt a quota system. Certain positions such as the financial officer of the National Assembly (*questure*), which hitherto had been occupied by men, were even given to women. This can no doubt be attributed to major efforts on the part of women to mobilize, across party lines, and in partnership with civil society organizations.

Other francophone African countries like Seychelles and Mali have made notable progress in the last 10 years without a quota system, instead simply yielding to the pressure of public opinion. Only some countries have adopted a quota system through the political parties. Such a system is often perceived as a strategy for moving towards parity. It needs to be accompanied by other measures to ensure that women are considered legitimate candidates.

For quotas to be truly helpful in improving the representation of women in parliaments, they must be accompanied by measures that ensure women political legitimacy and the means to compete on an equal footing with men for decision-making positions in the political parties. In several African countries, the quota system is also considered a "strategy towards parity" that should be applied through the political parties.

The few examples given here illustrate a situation that is common to many countries throughout the continent. They show, as Aminata Cisse Diaw and Katy Cisse Wone have stressed, that "the implementation of a voluntarist policy of taking into account quotas or parity has largely been based calculations related to electoral concerns."¹⁰ The use of quotas cannot, in their view, withstand the demands of politics. Because parties stand for election in order to win, they tend to use all assets available to them, in terms of both material and human resources, to draw the largest number of voters.

The development and promotion of quota systems is becoming more widespread, yet it is also a subject of contention.

The implementation of special provisions on behalf of women, through legislation or other measures, enables them to enter national and local power structures. The quota system allows them to be represented in legislatures and in the leadership bodies of political parties. According to Mrs Gladys Mutukwa, chairperson of the National Women's Lobby in Uganda: "The fact that the Vice-President of Uganda came in through affirmative action that this is a viable way to tap the talents of women..."¹¹ The quota system therefore allows women to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of their access to elective positions, be they the lack of transparent nomination and selection criteria, men's reluctance to share power, or the lack of public awareness as to the need for balanced representation of men and women in decision-making.

However, others argue that once set, a quota may constitute not a minimum, but a ceiling. In their view, the percentage of representation that has been won is not just a beginning, but a ceiling, which, if enforced, requires that women keep fighting. To go beyond the quota, to obtain a larger percentage, women have to engage in additional struggle that demands new actions and divides them over the opportunity to engage in yet another battle. It is also feared that the women elected may be undervalued, as it is suspected that they are elected not on the basis of their competence but due to the quota system. Finally, the quota system alone will not work. Quotas are only useful in elections by proportional list voting if women candidates also figure prominently on the lists (alternating every other position with men, or in alphabetical order). Where election is by majority vote, quotas are only useful if in the districts where women are standing for election, their political parties are considered to have a decent chance of winning.

Prospects for the Quota System

Including a quota system in a constitution is tantamount to introducing the right to be different. Some fear that such an approach would open the door to other quotas that might feed into the ethnic and regional divisions that plague the African continent. Quotas for women are sometimes perceived of as leading to an American style of "communitarianism" that gives special consideration to minorities. Although women are certainly not a minority, those who are reticent to accept women's quotas claim they might give rise to the idea of quotas for certain minorities or communities. One parliamentarian from Zimbabwe, Mr Charles Ndlovu, believes for instance that "quotas will create further segregation in our society."¹²

Parity could remove the obstacles and address the concerns delineated above. According to Mrs Mata Sy Diallo, former vice-president of the Senegalese National Assembly, "quotas can only be a transitory solution, a palliative, not a cure for the makings of a true democracy."¹³ Women want an equal sharing of responsibilities: "They want to be involved in decision-making on equality with men.". In other words, they want parity. Moreover, "if women want quality, that presupposes that we deserve the place we want to occupy. It presupposes that we are able to compete at all levels until we have access to the decision-making positions."¹⁴

The idea of constitutional reform to further egalitarian representation of women is fast expanding. According to Than Huyan Ballmer-Cao: "The advantage of this system is that there can be no gap between the law and reality."¹⁵ Such a reform does not set a time limit for implementing the measure.

De facto quotas or parity

The claim for parity may, in different areas, lead to proposals to set quotas in order to speed the access of women to politics. The Sixth African Regional Conference on Women has proposed that member countries ensure that they implement the recommendation of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, which says: "Governments must guarantee the representation of women in public, political and private sectors, and as long as the gap between men and women is not filled equitably, the concept of quota must be adopted and maintained."¹⁶

While it is necessary to keep in mind the importance of paving the way for a genuine and sustainable promotion of women in politics, one can support de facto quotas. However, it seems difficult to reach agreement on legal quotas, especially in francophone countries. As a result, it is largely the responsibility of political parties to take the necessary steps to accord a privileged place to those women who want to stand as candidates, such that they would have a real chance of winning. Another strategy that has been used is to allocate public funding to political parties based on their treatment of women and women's representation.

The adoption of the parity system, after the manner of France, is one solution for improving women's representation. Such a measure would allow women to be nominated on a regular basis and to be well-placed on the lists. Such a provision should not be seen as merely imitating the French model, and the quality and quantity of women in democratic institutions would have to translate into improved living conditions, and into better ways of conducting public affairs and exercising power.

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14. Inter-Parliamentary Union, op. cit. p. 54.
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16. United Nations, op. cit. p. 29.

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