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WEST AFRICAN WOMEN IN POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Elke Erlecke

When Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was elected by the African Union as the first ever female Chairperson of the Commission, it caused quite a buzz in the international press. The media were quick to highlight her role as a figurehead for the emancipation of women in Africa. The women of West Africa in particular are in desperate need of this kind of positive message to give them some encouragement. Uncontested, of course, are their positions as custodian of the stove fire, mothers of many children and bearers of the brunt of the work in the fields. In many cases it is women who have the monopoly on informal small businesses. Although no opportunity is missed for governments and political parties to emphasise the importance of their role in their countries' future development, what is lacking, however, is the kind of recognition and political representation necessary to reflect their actual importance to society.

A MAJOR STEP FORWARD FOR THE WOMEN OF AFRICA: BEIJING AND ITS EFFECTS

Numerous international conferences have focused on improving the situation of women in Africa. One major milestone was the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, which denounced the lack of political and parliamentary representation of women around the world.¹ Subsequent to the Conference, efforts were made

1 | The outcome of the Conference also encouraged West African women's organisations in their struggle for the rights of women in their respective countries. This is how in Mali, for example, the Collectif des Femmes de Mali (COFEM) and the Association Pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits de la Femme (APDDF) ensured that the influence of older Islamic leaders on the media was deterred..

in Africa to take measures designed to reduce discrimination against women and political strategies to improve their situation.

The 2003 Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa served to strengthen and expand the provisions of the 1981 African Charter on Human and People's Rights. For the very first time a document legally binding under international law addressed exclusively the situation of women in Africa and the promotion of their rights and protections. The signatory states were obliged to adopt all necessary measures to implement the protocol effectively and fully. When the protocol entered into effect in November 2005 it represented a major step forward in terms of international law. 26 of the 53 member states of the African Union have since ratified the Maputo Protocol. By 2004, 51 of the 53 countries had also signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

There is also no shortage of strategies to improve the situation of women at national level in western sub-Saharan Africa, mostly as a result of the Beijing World Conference on

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Women. However, life for the majority of the female population remains difficult. Women are still very under-represented in the area of political self-determination and participation. The majority of leading positions are held by men. In light of this fact, most national governments and political decision-makers are agreed that something needs to be done in the medium and long term. As a result, various stakeholders in western sub-Saharan Africa are working towards the common goal of improving gender equality, including governments, individual parties, civil society and a growing number of committed women.

Thus it is worth inquiring in regard to Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Togo: What is life like for women in these countries? What kind of opportunities do political parties offer women who want to get involved? How can women attain positions of responsibility and leadership within these parties or in parliament? And last but not least, what obstacles stand in the way of women's progress in these countries?

ROCKING CRADLES AND COUNTING COINS: FAMILY AND FINANCES

An example from Benin: Colombe was born three days before Christmas 2012 in the business city of Cotonou. At the moment, she sleeps all day under a mosquito net on the floor of her mother Denise's small market stall. Her future is pretty much already decided. Her mother earns quite well from her small fruit and vegetable business, but not so well that she will be able to afford to send her daughter to a private school in Benin. If her mother's income should drop, it goes without saying that Colombe will have to be taken out of school in order to keep her older brother in.



"All girls to school": The reality in Benin often looks different. | Source: © Elke Erlecke.

Women like Denise have a particularly hard time in this structurally weak region of West Africa. Their standard of living defines their social situation and their opportunities. Low life expectancy, marriage at a young age,² high birth rates and high infant mortality combined with limited or expensive access to medical care all create a situation that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to break out of what

2 | More than one-third of all girls in Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Mali and Togo were married before reaching their 18th birthday.

appears to be a predetermined course.³ Forced marriages are still widespread in rural regions. Should a woman become widowed in these areas, she often finds her freedom of movement becomes severely restricted, not to mention her personal way of life (for example, she is not allowed to wash or cut her hair for several months).

Being poor can present a major obstacle to women's desires to improve their lot in life. Appropriate development cooperation programmes in combination with strategies undertaken by national governments are attempting to help women find a way out of this hopeless

situation and, if possible, help them create a degree of financial independence and hence a stepping stone to social emancipation. In Benin, for example, microcredits are helping to put women in a position to start on the road to financial independence by providing a small amount of start-up capital.⁴ The business world is male-dominated, with 74 per cent of all those employed in the formal work sector being men. It is the informal sector that is the women's domain. Officially registered businesses run by women are in the clear minority.⁵ Unemployment is also a predominantly female issue – there is a huge gap in the number of men and women out of work in all five of the countries in the region, with the result that women continue to find themselves in a position of dependence.

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- 3 | One of the more negative determinants of women's lives remains that of violence, which is still prevalent in spite of the introduction of international and national laws to combat it. Domestic violence is still considered to be socially acceptable in many areas. The progress made in recent years in reducing the instances of genital mutilation should not lead us to lose sight of the fact that this is still considered acceptable in many parts of society. This practice, which can be life-threatening to the girls affected, is still a standard cultural practice amongst many ethnic groups and in the regions around Tillabéri, Diffa and the Niamey district. Sexual offences against women are often trivialised, especially in countries that have experienced armed conflicts in the past or in recent years. To add insult to injury, the victims are often socially stigmatised afterwards.
- 4 | In Benin, 94 per cent of those receiving microcredits are women. It should also be pointed out that President Boni Yayi made microcredits to women an important part of his platform during the presidential elections.
- 5 | In Niger, only 5.14 per cent of the businesses officially registered in 2007 were being run by women.

Family, job, raising the children – women’s lives limit the areas where they can make their own decisions.⁶ Their decision-making opportunities are generally limited to the private sphere. Involvement in the political process is also largely dependent upon the legal status that government policies and society in general accord to them and there have been some significant changes in this area over the last 30 years.

WOMEN AT THE CENTRE OF AFRICAN LIFE: FORMAL STATUS VERSUS REALITY

In the 1990s, women’s organisations throughout Africa were focused on bringing about constitutional changes to improve the legal status of women. West Africa was no exception. Since the turn of the millennium, the focus has been on safeguarding and strengthening individual women’s rights as well as introducing additional measures to outlaw discrimination. This positive development in the legal rights of women is also reflected in the legislation being passed in the individual countries. In Benin, for example, the government is endeavouring to mirror in their national legislation the right embedded in their Constitution to equal treatment for men and women. Women have a key role to play in the country’s development plans and the state is actively encouraging them in their role as private employees, for example, and is guaranteeing them the same rights as their male colleagues if they work in the public sector.⁷ Women also officially have equality with men in accordance with their Constitution and the *Code des personnes et de la famille*⁸ in Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire.

6 | Even still, not all women in all parts of the sub region have a say in domestic affairs. In Niger, for example, most domestic decisions are made by male members of the family. What should and shouldn’t be bought, how often the family should be visited, what kind of healthcare the family should have, what kind of family planning, if any, should be used, even sometimes what the family should eat – all of these things are subject to male decision-making. However, this situation changes considerably as soon as a woman has her own income: 85 per cent of women make their own decisions as to how the money is spent.

7 | Law No. 86-013, 26 Feb 1986.

8 | The Code actuel des personnes et de la famille du Burkina covers the rights and responsibilities of both spouses in terms of running the household (Art. 235). The law is popularly known as the “Code des femmes”.



Togolesian women in agriculture. However, in West African factories, they are still underrepresented. | Source: flickr / undptogo (CC BY).

And yet, as so often, the devil is in the detail. So far, the countries in the region between the Sahel and the Atlantic have not always been successful in aligning their national laws with international conventions, even when these conventions have been officially accepted. Even when alignment is achieved, there is a tendency to lean towards traditional notions of the law that are heavily influenced by ethnic or religious thinking. In the conflict between the modern and the traditional, it is often the latter that wins out. Violations thereof are culturally sanctioned. There are also still occasions where concrete laws have been put in place that actually run counter to the country's constitutional provisions. This is especially the case in those areas that reflect the practical reality of many women's lives, such as family law. In the majority of the countries in the region, the man has the status of *chef de famille*. It is he who chooses where the family lives and who controls all their household goods. Laws aimed at protecting women can also sometimes have the opposite effect, albeit unintentionally. The ban on polygamy in many countries in the region, for example, has encouraged the widespread practice of *repudiation* and throwing women out of their homes. These women are then left with no protection. And even when modern laws try to positively discriminate in favour of women, old patterns of behaviour can still in practice be the norm. Quotas for political parties do not, therefore, always mean that there will be higher levels of female participation in politics, because women are often hindered through informal pressure put on them by men.

Niger is a good example of the difficulties that can be experienced in the Sahel region when it comes to implementing laws guaranteed under the constitution. At first glance, the position of women in Niger appears to be better than in many other countries. The country has not only signed most of the international conventions on human rights, but equality between men and women is also guaranteed under national law. The Nigerien constitution guarantees the equality of all of its citizens, irrespective of gender, social standing, race, ethnicity or religion. Jobs in administration, government, the diplomatic corps and state-owned companies are subject to a quota system. The position of Second Vice-President of the National Electoral Commission is reserved for a woman. Additional special laws also guarantee men and women equal access to services and resources.

However, when it comes to actually implementing women's constitutional rights, legislators frequently come into conflict with proponents of established common law and Islamic law, especially in the case of the *Droit de la Famille et du Statut Personnel*. The Nigerien state attempted to pass the *Code de la Famille* into law several times, but opposition from various Islamic organisations consistently succeeded in preventing the law from being passed – first in 1976, then again between 1985 and 1989. The egalitarian approach of modern legislation conflicts directly with established common law, which has its origins in a patriarchal society whose rules are

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at odds with the rights of women as set forth in the constitution. If a woman submits to the rules of established common law, for example, she has no right to decide on the timing of or the number of pregnancies she will have, nor over her marriage or the dissolution of that marriage. The ability of the state to intervene in these areas is limited. The 2006 protocol of the *Charte Africaine sur les Droits des Femmes* came up against the same opposition as the *Code de la Famille* before it was finally signed by the National Assembly.

The full and effective legal implementation of existing laws is what currently stands in the way of true equality for men and women. Laws are not being fully applied

or implemented and sometimes new laws are not even made public. Sanctions against those who break the laws are often not considered and have little chance of being enforced. This means that tradition and cultural taboos continue to have the upper hand over efforts to improve the situation of women.

Table 1

Comparison of statistical parameters of countries in western sub-Saharan Africa

	Benin	Burkina Faso	Côte d'Ivoire	Niger	Togo
Women as percentage of over-all population in per cent	50.7	50.3	49.1	49.7	50.5
Life expectancy of women (2011)	58	56	57	55	59
Maternal mortality per 100,000 births (2010)	350	300	400	590	300
Births by women aged 15-19 in per cent (2011)	10.0	11.9	11.0	11.6	52.0
Births per woman (2011)	5.2	5.8	4.3	4	7
Literacy rate 15-24 year olds in per cent	45 (2010)	98 (2011)	62 (2010)	n.a.	75 (2009)

Source: World Bank Data Research.

Legislation allowing increased participation by women in the political process tends to come up against even stiffer opposition. In 1999 Niger ratified the Convention sur l'Élimination de Toutes les Formes de Discrimination à l'Égard des Femmes (CEDEF): this UN convention played a major role in the international codification of women's rights. It called for the same level of participation for women as for men in the signatory countries, in all areas of social and political life, in order to improve development opportunities. Yet, today Niger maintains reservations regarding the five articles that cover the full rights of women to participate.⁹

9 | Current political thinking still disputes that women have the same basic rights to participation as men. This is generally seen as self-evident by traditionalists and therefore requires no further explanation or justification.

TAKE NO SEAT: POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES¹⁰ AND PARLIAMENTS IN WEST AFRICA

In the 1990s women in politics in Africa began to enjoy greater visibility, including West Africa. This was due in great part to better education, growing experience in dealing with the public and the cautiously positive signs demonstrated by various governments towards the participation of women in politics. Women began pushing for greater representation in parliament and in government. The focus of African women's organisations shifted away from developmental goals towards legislative and constitutional change. West African women too started to become actively involved in political reform movements.¹¹

As the parties play a key role in the articulation of the political will as well as in providing key political players, the quantitative and qualitative representation of women is an important indicator.

However, in spite of their undoubted willingness to become politically active and their strong representation in civil society organisations, women are still a *quantité négligeable* in West African politics. As the political

parties play a key role in the articulation of the political will as well as in providing key political players, the quantitative and qualitative representation of women in the parties is an important indicator of their participation in the democratic opinion-forming process within their respective countries. The reason there is such a lack of female representation in

10 | There is often only out-of-date or incomplete data available on the representation of women in political organisations which is, in many ways, a reflection on many of the poorly structured parties themselves, with their weak policy-making and dominance by strong (male) leaders. This lack of data makes it difficult to carry out a proper analysis and for this reason we have added to the existing data with the ongoing monitoring of education initiatives introduced in 2012 plus a survey of the region's party functionaries and decision makers. The author would like to thank Jean-Baptiste Hounkpé, Anastasie N'Thoumon, Rodolphe Houedote, Eric Ouangré, Emmanuel Kouassi, Théophile Amouzou and Sylvain Zinsou for their support in conducting research. It should be noted that the fact that this report was being written has had the effect of making male leaders more aware of the question of women within their own parties.

11 | In Mali, women protesting against President Maoussa Traoré were shot. In Niger thousands of women demonstrated against the planned exclusion of women from the committee that was given the task of preparing for the National Conference in 1991.

the parties is attributable in part to the notion of what passes for (party) democracy within the various countries of the region.

The number of women contributing to the political process within political parties in West Africa varies markedly from country to country. Numbers range from “very many” in Côte d’Ivoire, through general under-representation in all of the Benin parties, to hardly any in Burkina Faso.¹² Burkinabe women argue that socio-cultural prejudices against party membership negatively influence women to refrain from becoming involved in party politics. If a woman were to join a party, it is believed she loses the connection to her family and neglects traditional duties. In addition, a lack of education makes it more difficult for women to join a party. This is also the case for many Burkinabe women who nevertheless decide to become involved in politics.

The question arises as to whether it would be less difficult for women to join parties if their interests were better represented. However, for this to happen the parties in the region, which are typically male-dominated, would have to be interested, in particular, in seeing women’s representation in the first place. It is worthwhile once again to consider Burkina Faso, in order to gain insight into the situation. Here, there are generally no specific women’s associations within the parties themselves. However, most of the women are usually members of other *associations* as well, often in leading positions. The Union pour la Renaissance/Parti Sankariste (UNIR/PS) party, a Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung cooperation partner in West Africa, does have a national women’s coordinator, but she is not solely responsible for women’s affairs and works with a (male) National Secretary for the Promotion of Women.¹³ Decisions on measures relating to women’s interests are in theory taken jointly, but in practice it is the Secretary alone who decides on policy and action.

12 | There remains an urgent need for accurate figures on the number of women involved in West Africa’s political parties.

13 | The cautious view of female members of the party is that the activities associated with this role could potentially extend beyond that of just coordination.

The situation is slightly different in Côte d'Ivoire. The country has 130 officially recognised parties, of which less than ten per cent are currently active. Each of these parties has a women's organisation. Female party members receive money for their activities on a case-by-case basis, though this is not a statutory requirement. Some of the party women are also members of the Union des Femmes des Partis Politiques. Meanwhile in Togo, most parties have a women's committee or at least a group of women, who get financial support on an ad hoc basis.

The fact that there is a general lack of representation of women's interests in the region's parties is often reflected in their manifestos. The political parties do call for better access to loans and land for women, promote measures to combat violence and discrimination, and improve employment and income-earning possibilities. However, their manifestos tend only to speak of women in politics in the general sense. Questions about women in leadership positions or their role in parliament are not usually accompanied by demands for more political action on these issues. They tend to analyse the situation of women, recognise their potential as supporters of the party and declare their belief in quotas. Whereas the manifestos stagnate at the level of lip service, lauding these supposed lynchpins of society while happily leaving their advancement to the progress of history.

Parties' manifestos are often little more than empty words that praise these supposed lynchpins of society while happily abandoning their advancement to the progress of history.

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One of the main triggers for women to become involved in party politics is the desire to contribute to their country's development. It is only in isolated cases that political role models are cited as reasons for becoming politically active.¹⁴ When women decide to become involved in specific political areas, it is more often than not in the fields of healthcare or economics. In Burkina Faso, elected officials and women from the leadership of the UNIR/PS,¹⁵ who

14 | When it came to role models, many of the women of the UNIR/PS party mentioned the life and thinking of revolutionary Thomas Sankara, who is still held in high regard in Burkina Faso.

15 | The women were questioned about their experiences during the nomination and election campaigns initially during the 2012 summer workshops for young party leaders, again in November 2012 before the local and parliamentary elections in Burkina Faso and for a third time at the end of 2012.

were asked several times over a period of eighteen months to give their assessment of the position of women in the party, claimed that the fight for emancipation, the abolition of discrimination and in many cases the struggle for peace were among their main objectives. Togolese women were even more specific: they want to influence the country's democratic development, participate to the same extent as their male counterparts and defend women's interests.¹⁶

Once the decision has been made to become involved, perhaps even to pursue a career within a party, most women then quickly learn which soft skills are needed to become successful in politics. This experience, which can have far-reaching consequences, is common to most politically active women from Zinder to Zongo. Although there are relatively few women at leadership level in the parties, they can still give us a clear indication of the kind of profile women need to succeed. They have to be married with several children, able to speak French and educated at least to college level. Financial independence can also be an advantage if the woman has no family to support her. What is perhaps not always appreciated is how important it is for the family to fully accept her political activities. This is where a break with tradition is required, as a woman's involvement in politics presents a significant challenge to the kind of traditional thinking that believes a woman's place is in the home.

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THE LONG ROAD TO POWER: WEST AFRICAN WOMEN EN ROUTE TO KEY ROLES IN PARLIAMENT AND POLITICS

The UNIR/PS party in Burkina Faso has 2,000 members, with a politburo made of up 114 members, of which 49 are women. Two women are members of the Secrétariat

16 | This unambiguous language is a clear reflection of the current involvement of Togolese women in the arguments between the government and the opposition. These daily arguments allow female politicians to give voice to their aims and goals, and female representatives of Togolese NGOs and parties are not above using unconventional methods to get themselves heard. Good examples would be the sex strike last summer or the protest march by thousands of women dressed in red from the Collectif Sauvons le Togo September 2012, demanding that the president not stand for election again in the 2015 presidential elections.

Exécutif National. In Benin, the number of women who have a say in party affairs varies between eleven and 27 per cent. In Côte d'Ivoire, the current *Grande Chancelière*, Henriette Diabaté, was long-time Secretary General of the Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR), the party of the

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current President, Allassane Ouattara. Togo also has women in the executive branch of their political parties. One of the 48 parties in Niger in 2008 was led by a woman, while in Togo two of the 100 officially recognised parties have female leaders. For these women to succeed, they needed a combination of experience, qualifications and a willingness to fight for what they wanted. And yet the influence of women on internal party institutional and power structures continues to be severely limited. The quest for an explanation for this phenomenon repeatedly leads to stereotypical cultural barriers that not only stop women from becoming fully involved in internal party dialogue and decision-making, but also mean that there is no meaningful place for them alongside the party leadership when they appear in public.

However, the growing number of women in national and local parliaments in the region is a fair indication that efforts to increase the number of women in elected positions continue unabated. Women's representation in Benin's parliament during the first four parliamentary terms after the switch to a multi-party democracy (1995 to 2008) was very low – ranging from six to twelve per cent. In the third of these four terms, there were only six female MPs out of 83. The number of female mayors in Benin went up from three per cent in 2002 to more than four per cent in 2008. The government is hoping this number will increase to 30 per cent in 2015. In Burkina Faso, 19 of 359 mayoral positions were held by women after the 2006 local elections.

Niger provides the best evidence in this regard of only slow improvement in women's representation in parliament and other important bodies. Currently, the country has one of the lowest rates of women's participation in politics in the world.¹⁷ At least there are some positive signs in terms of the number of seats in the National Assembly – in 2008,

17 | Ministère de la Promotion de la femme et de la protection de l'enfant, UNICEF, Institut National de la Statistique, *Analyse de la situation de l'enfant et de la femme*, Niamey, 2008, 232.

15 of 113 MPs were women. However, it is clear that in the local communities many key positions are still clearly reserved for men – something that is not unusual in the Sahel due to the traditional influence of Islam – and women are also under-represented on local advisory bodies. When women in Niger are involved in the decision-making process at a local level, it is more often than not in their role as organisers of savings associations (ton-tines). In 2007, 17 per cent of Niger’s city councillors were women, which is a sign that numbers are gradually increasing. However, there were only six women among the 245 mayors that were elected. In 2003, the first female Sous-Préfet was elected in Niger. However, the hostility of the local population towards her appointment forced her to resign. But all is not doom and gloom: in 2005 the Communauté Urbaine of Niamey announced that it had had a female Préfet Président for two years.

In 2007, 17 per cent of Niger’s city councillors were women, which is a sign that numbers are gradually increasing. However, there were only six women among the 245 mayors.

In addition to the actual number of elected female officials at local and national level, the number of women elected relative to the number who actually stood for election also gives us an indication of the level of acceptance of female candidates amongst the general population. In the 2006 presidential elections in Benin, there were two female candidates, Marie-Elise Gbédo and Célestine Zanou, while only Gbédo stood at the last election. Neither of them got more than 0.4 per cent of the vote. In Côte d’Ivoire 100 women stood as candidates for parliament in 2010. Only ten per cent of them were elected. In 2010, Marima Cissé, Vice President of the Nigerien Human Rights Commission, was the first female presidential candidate in Niger’s history. In the parliamentary elections of December 2012¹⁸ in Burkina Faso 981 women stood for election (out of a total of 6,074 candidates) and competed for 127 seats in the National Assembly. 23 women were elected, 15 of them directly. The remaining eight were chosen because the elected deputies were promoted to government positions. Without exception, the decisive factors for the election of these women candidates were their social position, the status of their families and their roots within the population. Even more important (and decisive) were the reasons not to

18 | There are no definitive results for the latest local elections in Burkina Faso as in some constituencies the elections need to be repeated due to irregularities.

elect women. Once again the same old prejudices were in evidence – non-acceptance of women working in the public eye and the over-stepping of cultural boundaries. Some of the women were also hampered to an extent by having held positions in the public sector before, and were accused of having been accomplices in previous corrupt systems.

LOST IN GENDER: FEMALE AFRICAN MINISTERS AND THEIR DEPARTMENTS

Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso each have five, while Togo has seven – female ministers, that is. In Benin, the proportion of women in government positions ranged between ten and 27 per cent from 1991 to 2007. Today the number of women in the executive is less than 25 per cent. There are 26 men and only seven women in Thomas Boni Yayi's current cabinet,¹⁹ and the women generally have positions that might be thought of as appropriate to their gender.

It is not only in this former model democracy that the distribution of cabinet posts appears to have been made along traditional lines. In Benin, as in West Africa as a whole, the poor representation of women in government stands in stark contrast to the significant presence women have in civil society organisations and political parties.²⁰

THE DEBATE OVER QUOTAS: DRASTIC REMEDY FOR ELECTIONS AND PARTIES ALIKE?

The fact that West Africa's parliaments, parties and ministries are still to a large extent free of female influence and leadership raises the question as to whether the people as a whole consider this to be a problem. The fact that the issue of quotas for both parties²¹ and elections keeps raising its head would suggest that this may be the case.

19 | By only appointing seven women, the president is renegeing on his promise to have 30 per cent women in his government.

20 | In Benin, Rékya Madougou, Minister of Microfinance and Youth and Women's Employment is an exception to the rule. Before she became a minister, she played an important role in civil society and even though she is now a minister, she still keeps in contact with her former colleagues.

21 | For a discussion on the value and effectiveness of women's quotas: Antonie Katharina Nord, "Mehr Geschlechtergerechtigkeit? Zur Frauenquote in Afrika", *GIGA Focus*, 5, 2012, http://giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_afrika_1205.pdf (accessed 17 Feb 2013).

Burkina Faso has no women's quotas in the political parties, while in Côte d'Ivoire it is left to the parties to decide whether or not they want to apply quotas.

There are also some differences when it comes to elections. A law stipulating a 30 per cent quota for local and parliamentary elections was passed in Burkina Faso in 2009. Côte d'Ivoire, on the other hand, decided against quotas for election candidates. Togo

is currently discussing a potential parity law for election candidates. It could in theory be applied in time for the local elections in March/April 2013. Benin had the same discussion the previous year. Leading non-governmental organisations are also calling for the introduction of a parity law for women in decision-making positions and in government and parliament.

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It would seem then that quotas are generally considered a potentially effective way of improving women's representation in politics. However, the parties still appear to be somewhat reticent when it comes to introducing quotas themselves.

GREY EMINENCES: DETOURS TO POWER

West Africa has very few women in top political positions. As a result, women who are keen to advance in politics have a lack of role models in the political parties and society. Women who are successful in business or civil society are all the more important in this respect. Many of these role models have good contacts within political circles and a certain amount of influence as a result of their success in other areas. These kinds of women can be found in all the countries of West Africa examined for this study. They can have an influence on important political decisions, whether by endorsing a particular candidate during an election or using their financial resources to save a party from economic ruin. In the eyes of these women, who may be prevented by social conventions and traditions from taking leading roles in the parties or in parliament, this kind of informal influence on the country's politics, without the necessity of being directly involved, can be very attractive.

There are many examples of such women. One of them is the Nana Benz of Togo – the wholesalers who buy colourful Dutch wax cloth and act as distributors, making a fortune along the way. At the head of their association is their president Ayélé Creppy. Other examples include 2010 presidential candidate Brigitte Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson and Claudina Akakpo, head of the Togolese press agency. Candide Leguede, President of the Association of Women Business Owners in Togo and board member of the Togo Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and Ingrid Awade, head of the country's tax authority, have also made a name for themselves when it comes to having a regular influence on public opinion. Their sister in Burkina Faso would be Alizèta Ouédra, the president of Burkina Faso's Chamber of Industry and Commerce and a self-made woman who became wealthy dealing in leather and animal skins. Today she is the head of several businesses thanks to her links with the president's family – she is the mother-in-law of the president's younger brother. The status of these women in society guarantees them a certain degree of political influence that may have escaped them if they had opted for a political career.



Women in Togbin: The Nana Benz in Togo have made a fortune selling colourful Dutch wax cloth. | Source: © Elke Erlecke.

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN WEST AFRICA – A NEVER-CHANGING STORY?

This is a man's world: politics in West Africa continues to be a domain dominated by men. The reasons for this can be traced back to childhood when girls are taught to be subordinate and passive. Later, being tied to house and family generally ensures that there is simply no time to pursue a career in politics. If a woman does take the step of entering the dangerous world of politics, it is often their "sisters" who end up causing their career to fail. The efforts made by Marie-Elise Gbédo, candidate in the 2006 and 2011 Benin presidential elections, to improve the lot of the country's women, did not receive sufficient support from the female voters she was trying to help.

It's the same old story. The women lack everything they need – resources, political experience, upbringing, political education and, because of being tied to house and family, the kind of political contacts that would make entering politics easier. Women who want to stand for election have an even harder time recruiting supporters and successfully running an election campaign requires a substantial amount of money.

Socio-cultural discrimination and stereotyping can also be decisive in frustrating their efforts. Social exclusion – "a woman does not speak in public" – is a serious obstacle to the integration of women in political organisations. Women are basically seen as inferior beings who should not be allowed to express their views.²² Permanent lobbying offers a way to overcome the ongoing marginalisation of women in decision-making roles along with the influence of successful role models such as the new Chairperson of the African Union Commission Dlamini-Zuma. Her tip for the progress of women in politics in Africa is "keep at it!" That the women of West Africa have the determination to go the whole way is clear. What is also clear is that they will need every bit of that determination.

22 | The conviction that they should not sit in the same meetings as men is often shared by the women themselves.