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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL GOVERNANCE IN THE G5 SAHEL COUNTRIES: TOLERATING THE INDECENT GAP

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#### ABSTRACT

It's hard to continue believing that women aren't competent, just as it's absurd to hold the argument that all women are eternally incapable or unconcerned about the need to get involved in order to contribute to political governance. So, it's not uncommon to hear it said that women's low presence and participation in decision-making bodies, including political ones, is due to their unwillingness to get involved. The main argument, as we know, is intrinsically linked to the conscious or unconscious desire of men to maintain their symbolic dominance over women, to preserve a balance of power that protects their interests. This permanent struggle is maintained on a daily basis by men and women alike, in a social environment that is quick to preserve the heavy social straitjacket that enables social reproduction in a relationship of intergenerational continuity. Through education, women also play a front-line role in the construction of inequalities in gender relations between girls and boys. This is why, in observing the unequal gender relations that persist in the political sphere in the G5 Sahel countries, we qualify this state of tolerance of the indecent gap.

#### INTRODUCTION

The G5 Sahel region comprises five countries: Burkina, Mauritania, Mali<sup>1</sup>, Niger and Chad. It has an estimated population of 100 million, spread over an area of 5,097,338 km<sup>2</sup>. By 2050, according to TIARE (2023), 'if demographics continue at 3% per year, the population will be 200 million'. Population dynamics mean that women represent around 52% of the population in the Five States. Although under-valued, young people represent the main gold mine of the G5 Sahel region, given their large numbers. Historically speaking, the G5 Sahel countries joined forces through this sub-regional organization in February 2014 to tackle the serious insecurity they share. The age-old objective is to promote development to combat impoverishment. Given the high proportion of women and girls in the countries of the G5 Sahel region, it is clear that this is a decisive potential to be exploited to combat poverty and achieve sustainable, equitable development. But the reality on the ground is quite different. A world of disparities and inequalities persists, adversely affecting the well-being of women in the G5 Sahel region.

Indeed, the G5 Sahel countries have little capacity to respond adequately to the fundamental human rights of their populations. According to the United Nations Development Programme report, all these countries have a low human development index<sup>2</sup>. In 2021, Mauritania's index<sup>3</sup> was the highest at 0.556, while Chad's was the lowest at 0.394 points. In relation to gender, the gender inequality index<sup>4</sup> was also low for all countries. It ranged from 0.652 to 0.611. This overall situation shows an imbalance in development, particularly to the detriment of women and girls. This raises the question of how to combat the "sexual segregation" highlighted by AGACINSKI<sup>5</sup>. One of the strategies for achieving this is political commitment. In this sense, access to the political sphere is necessary to fight against injustices that remain structural and strongly rooted in decision-making institutions at both traditional and modern levels. From independence to the present day, it appears that women's representation in the political sphere is lower than that of men. For example, in the 5 countries of the G5 Sahel, the position of female prime minister has only been held once in over 60 years. That was in Mali with Mme Cissé Mariam Kaïdara Sidibé from April 03, 2011 to March 22, 2022.

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<sup>2</sup> The Human Development Index was initially based on three criteria: gross domestic product per capita, life expectancy at birth and educational attainment of children aged 17 and over.

<sup>3</sup> Average human development

<sup>4</sup> It is estimated according to three dimensions: women's reproductive health, their empowerment and the labour market.

<sup>5</sup> Full quote: "Gender inequality remains the greatest denial of the universality of human rights in their most fundamental sense. It should be possible to fight sexual segregation everywhere in the world", Libération - March 9, 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Mali to announce its withdrawal on May 15, 2022

Apart from this position, the difficulty of access for women to the political executive in the G5 Sahel region is reinforced by their low level of representation, less than 30% in all the governments that have been formed to date. It has to be said, then, that the political sphere is a citadel that grows few roses in the G5 Sahel countries. On the whole, the unequal presence of women in political governance is well established. Women are poorly represented, and although some progress has been made, it is still insufficient. Hence our research question: what factors explain this imbalance? This question is a recurring one, and has already been the subject of several studies, including in Burkina Faso. The most frequently cited explanatory factors include socio-cultural, economic and material obstacles to women's full participation in the country's political life. In addition to these key factors, the determinants usually highlighted include inadequate education, work overload linked to domestic occupation, self-criticism on the part of women themselves, which reduces their commitment and solidarity, and even fear of the critical gaze of the social environment, which defames them to the detriment of their intrinsic qualities.

We have chosen to explain women's unequal access to the political sphere using BOURDIEU Pierre's theory of dominants. Dominants are social, ethnic or gender groups that impose their values on the dominated, who integrate and internalize them, becoming supporters of the elements of their domination. Drawing on documentary material and the speeches of male and female political representatives, we will organize our reflections around the assessment of the effectiveness of women's involvement in the political sphere, on the one hand, and the factors of tolerance of the indecent gap to be overcome, on the other. In this way, we will analyze how men maintain power in their own hands in line with their perception of hegemonic masculinity, and impose themselves on women in the political sphere at the cost of multiple alibis.

**Women's ineffective and passive presence in the political sphere:** The low effectiveness of women in politics is linked to several factors. On the one hand, they are poorly qualified technically, and on the other, they are instrumentalized by political players.

**Low qualifications as a source of inefficiency:** Women make up the largest proportion of the electorate. It is also the one most characterized by a low level of education and low own income. These unequal empowerment factors between women and men contribute to their unequal access to political leadership for the governance of the city. Women are present in political parties, but rarely occupy decisive decision-making positions. Strange as it may be, despite the flourishing emergence of feminist movements, political parties created and led by women are rare in the sub-region. In Burkina, the following women party leaders were observed: Monique Yeli Kam, Saran Sérémé and Françoise Toé. In Chad, we noted Mme Beassemda Lydie<sup>6</sup>, Mme Damnodji Irène<sup>7</sup>, Ngaradouri Bourkou Luiz<sup>8</sup>, Alixe Naïmbaye<sup>9</sup> and Djelar Koumadi Mariam<sup>10</sup>. In Mali, Kante Djenabou Ndiaye is president of the political party Alliance "Women on the march for an emerging Mali". In Mauritania, the women political leaders Mme Lalla

Mariem Mint Moulaye Idriss and Mme Aicha Mint Jedeine, candidates in the 2003 and 2014 presidential elections respectively, were all independents. In Niger, no women-led party has yet been established. The general observation is the predominance of a passive, low-profile presence of women in positions of political responsibility. It's a situation of symbolic domination of women by men, or of the majority by the minority, which is maintained as best it can over time.

**Manipulation for the benefit of male political leadership:** In the life of political parties, women are recognized as powerful mobilizers of supporters. They also play a decisive role in animating party life. That said, given their limited access to political leadership, it should be noted that they are an instrumental force for mobilization and leadership. They do not benefit from favorable positioning on political party lists, and in many cases, their priority concerns are not sufficiently reflected in political party programs. The various G5 Sahel countries have adopted quota laws to oblige political parties to increase the number of women on electoral lists, up to 30% of either sex for legislative and municipal elections. What they have in common is the concern to take account of the fact that women have fewer technical skills and resources than men to gain equal access to positions of political responsibility. On this basis, quota laws aim to promote equity measures to improve women's political leadership.

Despite the existence of quota laws, the recurring observation is the absence of dissuasive sanctions in the event of non-application of the quota law by parties. For ROUAMBA (2019) "*only (...) political will can bring about the desired results*". In Burkina Faso, for example, the sanction is indirect and reduced to a supposed loss of financial bonus for the party. This suggests that the government has opted for positive sanctions to reward with additional financial resources those parties that succeed in positioning 30% of women in eligible or non-eligible positions on its list of candidates. SORGHO (2019) notes in this vein: "*(...) that once again, the government is taking the opportunity to pull the wool over women's eyes*". The representation gap between women and men in the political sphere is so wide and so constant over the years in the 5 countries that the arguments of low political technicality, inexperience, low commitment on the part of women and the weight of socio-cultural constraints no longer suffice. The absence of political will remains the determining factor.

**Tolerance factors for the indecent gap to be overcome:** The reasons put forward to justify women's lack of success in politics are many and varied. Among other things, they are alibis that do not resist the will of the players and, above all, the State, if they want to overcome them.

**The alibi of male non-responsibility:** The alibi put forward by political actors usually revolves around the designation of sociocultural causes, such as prejudice and gender stereotypes, to justify women's low level of commitment. It's an argument that doesn't stand up to scrutiny, given that women are not always absent from the source of influence in decision-making. In Burkinabe tradition, for example, it is said that the most important decisions are taken after a good night's reflection. Night is said to bring advice. In practice, women are among the best advisors at household level and when it comes to managing power.

A Moorish proverb has it that "*What the braid has spent the night on, the beard will be there in the morning*". This idea of

<sup>6</sup> Party for Integral Democracy and Independence

<sup>7</sup> Citizen Party of Chad

<sup>8</sup> Rally for Progress and Social Justice Party

<sup>9</sup> Action for the Republic, Democracy and Development Party

<sup>10</sup> Union Nationale pour l'Alternance au Tchad party

women's valuable role in supporting strategic decision-making is shared by all G5 Sahel communities. This means that it's not right to adopt a fatalistic stance. On the contrary, it underpins the existence of women's political leadership potential, which we can choose to develop. The choice of highlighting women's incapacity is a negative and highly reductive intentionality that tends to obliterate their full potential in this field. By dint of considering women as major incapacitators on the political scene, we come to forget that they have the potential to play a full role in the political sphere.

**The ostrich policy, detrimental to the possibility of succession:** The other factor that explains why the gap between men's and women's political leadership has only narrowed slightly is passivity, which is detrimental to the possibility of succession. The political scene in the G5 Sahel countries is dominated by men. As a result, men have a wider network of influence and influence the promotion of newcomers. Women must necessarily be sponsored by men. This usually comes at the price of mistrust and political competition. Demands can be economic or even undesirable (harassment, sextortion, sexual exploitation). The absence of an institutional training framework hampers the regular promotion of political actors. The on-the-job, experience-based approach is unfavorable to women, reducing the capacity for intergenerational renewal of women's political leadership. That said, we can see the limits of the influence of the legal framework. Indeed, political activity is as liberal as the creation of an association. The State cannot intervene to impose the conditions for women's participation in political party membership. Initiatives to promote women's political leadership, such as the quota law in the G5 Sahel countries, are encountering stumbling blocks that limit their effective application. Application is not systematic, and results have fallen far short of expectations. None of the G5 Sahel countries currently has a 30% quota for women in government. In parliaments or transitional legislative assemblies, women's representation is still below 30%. We therefore need to ask ourselves what new avenues can be explored to meet the challenge of promoting political leadership that is accepted by all.

## DISCUSSION

**Between despair and hope, we must act now:** Despite the self-victimization rampant among women themselves as a result of socio-cultural, economic and legal constraints on political involvement, not all windows of hope are closed.

**Self-victimization by women themselves:** The low level of women's access to positions of leadership/political responsibility in the predominantly female G5 Sahel region is not to the region's strategic advantage. It is a denial of women's potential in the fight against poverty, insecurity and sustainable development. To ignore the most important fringe of its population in a state of poor access to quality basic social services, of low contribution to animation and political governance is inconceivable and worthy of suicidal myopia. That said, the perception of women's powerlessness and submissiveness is largely nurtured by education. Whether in the traditional or the modern system, there is still a low value placed on the status of women. The idea that women are eternally powerless survives from generation to generation. The changes observed, though genuinely progressive, are still not enough to deconstruct unequal social relationships and

reverse the trend. According to LOWERY (2022), at the current rate of progress, it will take centuries to achieve total gender equality. Women, who are at the heart of the transmission of social education, inevitably play a role of unconscious self-stigmatization. For the most part, they continue to pass on the prejudices and stereotypes of their social environment, which are largely detrimental to their own future. This, of course, has repercussions on political power relations, where most women continue to think that this is a sphere reserved for men. When it comes to forming governments, it's common to hear that women haven't had the courage to accept proposals for ministerial posts. A recent example is the statement made by the Prime Minister of Burkina Faso KYELEM M.A. de T. (2023) as follows: "*Several women have refused to join the government*".

**Looking to the future to deconstruct and promote female political leadership:** Despite this despairing picture, it is clear that the behavior of players is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context. Few women have ever run for president. In Burkina Faso, the following candidates stand out: Monique Yéli Kam<sup>11</sup>, Justine Couliadiati<sup>12</sup> and Korotimi Gorette<sup>13</sup>. In 2020, after analysis of presidential candidacies in Burkina Faso, 14 candidates were validated, including only one woman. Including just one woman. Saran Séréné, leader of a political party, was also a candidate for the presidential elections in 2015. In Niger, the first female candidate, Mme Bayard Mariama Gamatié presidential candidate in 2011. In Chad, in addition to Mme Beassemda Lydie in 2021, there was Ms. Marthe Dorkagoum, an independent presidential candidate in 2016. In Mali, the following candidates have been nominated for the presidential elections: Kante Djenabou Ndiaye in 2018, Sidibé Aminata Diallo in 2007 and 2013. In Mauritania, Lalla Mariem Mint Moulaye Idriss is the second candidate in the presidential election observed in 2014 after the candidacy of Aicha Mint Jedeine in 2003. Women who have entered the political electoral arena have had less than encouraging results: less than 2% in all countries, and even at the bottom of the list in most countries. This does not help to motivate the female sex despite the self-sacrifice and perseverance of the candidates. We believe that it is responsibility of the State to create a binding framework for the application of legal texts to promote women's political leadership. However, the younger generation is becoming increasingly involved in politics. Women are increasingly present in local executive bodies at commune level. They need sound, unprejudiced training to progress in the political sphere. They are far from fragile or incapable of evolving in the political sphere. To paraphrase GHANDI, to regard women as "*the weaker sex is defamation; it is man's injustice to woman*". Ultimately, we are convinced that it is possible to ensure that in the G5 Sahel region, governments have sufficient pools of women political leaders who are committed to serving their countries without fear of discrimination and stigmatization. The organization of country forums to identify ways and means of fostering the emergence of sustained political leadership by women, under the impetus of the G5 Sahel institution, would be a good start. If we are at all aware of women's potential, the argument that the handful of "*surviving women politicians*" refuse to get involved rings hollow and is no longer acceptable. In any case, this is an

<sup>11</sup> Movement for the rebirth of Burkina Faso party

<sup>12</sup> Independent candidate

<sup>13</sup> Independent candidate

invitation to take action to bring about lasting change in the unequal gender relations in politics in the G5 Sahel countries.

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