



“Women in Politics in Senegal”

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Following the conference in Mexico City in 1975, and the conferences in Copenhagen, Nairobi, Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing in 1995, women’s participation in development and women’s access to decision-making positions have become recurrent issues that states and political decision-makers have had to grapple with. Today, all actors understand the basic notion that women’s full participation in public affairs is one of the fundamental conditions for building democracy and achieving harmonious, sustainable development.

A true democracy is characterized by the full and equal participation of women and men in the formulation and implementation of decisions in all spheres of public life. No country can call itself democratic if half of the population is excluded from the decision-making process.

In 1995, the states parties that acceded to the Beijing Platform for Action committed themselves to taking steps to increase the number of women in decision-making positions. Nonetheless, there is still a low percentage of women in decision-making positions, especially in regard to elective office. In fact, very few mechanisms have been implemented by these states. Apart from the Nordic countries, which are well known for their policies in this area, and France, with its 1999 constitutional amendment, all one finds are statements of good intent.

Women in Politics in Senegal

The situation in Senegal is quite complex, as in many countries. While women account for more than 50 percent of the population and for more than 50 percent of the electorate, and while they play a fundamental role in the country’s economic development, they are hardly to be found in decision-making positions in general, particularly in the National Assembly. We will not dwell now on the socio-cultural, economic and political obstacles to women’s participation in Senegal. The exhaustive analysis

by Nadezdha Shvedova in IDEA's *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* handbook seems entirely accurate.¹

Even though the Constitution of Senegal, adopted in 2001, is relatively progressive when it comes to women's rights, there is no institutional mechanism to promote them politically.

As for women's representation in the National Assembly, Senegal is among the leading countries in Francophone Africa, with a rate of 19.2 percent since 2001. This has increased steadily over the past 20 years, climbing from 12 percent in 1993 to 16 percent in 1998.

Table 1: Women in the National Assembly of Senegal from 1957-2001

Legislature	Number of Seats	Number of seats held by Women
Legislature 1957–63	80	0
Legislature 1963–68	80	1
Legislature 1968–73	80	2
Legislature 1973–78	80	4
Legislature 1978–83	80	8
Legislature 1983–88	100	13
Legislature 1988–93	120	18
Legislature 1993–98	120	14
Legislature 1998–2001	140	21
Legislature 2001–06	120	23

This trend can be explained by a set of factors among which one can note the growing consciousness of women themselves, encouraged by a national and international situation favourable to women's representation in terms of quality and numbers. In the absence of a legislative mechanism, they have mainly concentrated on working with political parties and political actors generally, through initiatives to raise awareness, advocacy campaigns, and the holding of training workshops.

Coordinated action to promote the political role of women, through their organizations, really began in the context of international preparations for the Beijing conference. Until then, initiatives were isolated and quite weak.

Strategies to Promote Women in Politics

In 1994, at a workshop organized by the African Institute for Democracy on the topic of 'Women in Democracy', a group of women involved with political parties, trade unions, and women's organizations decided to create a unified structure to promote women's leadership, especially in politics, which it called the Senegalese Council of Women (Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes (COSEF)). Its status as an entity that cut across party lines, the commitment and cohesion of women at the grassroots, and its national presence in all ten regions of Senegal, made COSEF a major innovation in Senegalese politics.

As there were no legislative measures to assure the promotion of women to elected office, COSEF decided to develop strategies to work with different actors with the potential to further women's representation. These included the political parties, women's political movements, women's organizations, civil society in general, and the media.

The first meetings between multi-party COSEF delegations and the national leadership structures of the political parties were organized in 1996, on the eve of local elections. But despite the new initiative and the amount of press coverage, the results were quite limited: vague promises and commitments. Nonetheless, the seed was sown, as the discussions addressed issues regarding internal promotion and women's leadership programmes, in addition to the composition of candidate lists for election.

In 1997, efforts were made to consolidate COSEF structures at the grassroots level and to initiate training programmes for women and to raise awareness of gender issues among those who were elected. The 1998 legislative elections were preceded by a major campaign under the banner of 'Democracy where are you?' The campaign combined actions geared towards the parties, the media, and the general public, including press conferences, posters, the publication of inserts in the national press, and the production and dissemination of a cassette. Accordingly, under pressure from women and especially women's organizations, some parties have instituted quota systems (which ranges from 25 percent to 40 percent), which have experienced difficulties. For other parties, having directives sent to the grassroots structures in the lead-up to the elections was enough to ensure that the quota was implemented by parties.

However, despite resistance, the position of women on candidate lists began to improve. Of 20 lists: two put women in second place, right after the secretary-general, on the national list; three placed the first woman in third position; and two placed the first woman in fourth position. Another major gain is that, in 23 of Senegal's 33 departments, 12 parties put women at the top of departmental lists.

As a result, the percentage of women on the lists varies between one percent and 20 percent for the departmental lists and between 13 percent and 50 percent for the national lists. Senegal has a mixed electoral system, with proportional voting for national lists and majority voting for departmental lists.

The Role of Political Parties

One of the conclusions drawn from the evaluation of the 'Democracy where are you?' campaign is that 'whether there is substantial representation of women on the lists depends on their presence in the directing bodies of their parties'.² Yet number of women in directing bodies of political parties is low. Moreover, the evaluation confirmed that resistance to the quota system is also to be found in the party apparatuses and their grassroots structures, as well as among certain women who find it demeaning.

Most of the women deputies in the National Assembly have been elected via proportional representation from the national lists. This confirms the results of the analysis by Richard Matland, who states that proportional voting is more favourable to women. One example is the national list of the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) – today the majority party in the National Assembly – in the last elections. Clearly, the party leadership decided to include a certain number of women candidates on the national list in winnable positions, to compensate for the very limited number of women on the departmental lists contested by majority vote. Even though it is apparent when analyzing the situation in Senegal that women in politics is not seen as integral to expanding democracy, it appears that this may be changing.

Already, the question regarding women in decision-making positions is posed within the political organizations, along with the question concerning just how much weight they have. In effect, women are hardly present in the parties' leadership bodies, at both the national and local levels. Knowing that it is at this leadership level that the candidates for election are recruited, it is not surprising that women candidates are so few in number.

Most of Senegal's political parties have created women's movements that are affiliated with the party or are a party structure. In principle, this somehow reflects the willingness of the parties to take on board women's concerns, and to address them actively. Yet one must ask: has their impact been evaluated, especially the resulting type of female representation, in the party structures? This is very important insofar as it is the main mechanism to ensure women's representation in the directing positions of the parties, and to determine who will feature on the electoral lists. Hence, it is not surprising that so few women are elected.

The parties' training programmes are aimed at bolstering their capacity to carry out various activities; for a long time, for some, these programmes were very important. Yet, rarely does one see a programme designed specifically for women – that is, one that is mindful of women's needs and orientation. In fact, what has been missing the most, when it comes to expanding women's representation, is a genuine political will that goes beyond a declaration of principles. The objective of the parties is to come to power, to win the elections. But one does not find enough of an interest in building a balanced society, a task to be assumed in all respects by the men and women who are part of that society.

As indicated by Aissata De Diop in her study published in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* handbook, the fight for greater women's representation has essentially been waged by women and organizations for the defence of human rights, and civil society organizations. With very few exceptions, the parties have not made a fundamental issue of it.

Drawing on the lessons of the preceding campaigns, the 2000 legislative elections and the 2001 local elections were contested by a coalition bringing together five organizations in the COSEF, called the Group of Five (G5). The main lesson was the importance of placing emphasis on the quality of female representation through conscious appropriation of the key issues. The G5 initiated a broad action called the Citizen Campaign. The objective was not only to increase the number of women elected by working with the political parties, but also to bolster the capacities of women who are potential candidates for local elections, by designing new strategies with them. Fora were thus organized in ten regions of Senegal in order to gain support for the candidates. A large number of these female candidates benefited from the pre-campaign and campaign modules of the training.

The Citizen Campaign has laid the foundations for further action with the women who have been elected. Such action can be expected to have a multiplier effect. The Citizen Campaign was positive overall, given the quality and number of women targeted, and, in particular, in regard to the positions that they held on lists.

Lessons Learned

In view of all of the above, it is correct to note that, in Senegal, the terms of the debate have been framed, and framed well. The political actors have been called upon and none has called into question the need to work to ensure better female representation in political decision-making bodies.

Now, we must draw out the lessons from our own experience and the experiences of others and determine the best solutions for our democracy, while clearly understanding that there is no single or miraculous solution, and that quotas alone will not solve the problem.

As for the quota, beyond the debate regarding its adoption, which is the focus of this discussion in general, one must insist on an analysis of the process by which it is implemented, so as to make clear the responsibilities of the various actors and the measures that should accompany the quota if it is to be effective. Women should also direct their actions more effectively, gearing their efforts towards the real vehicles of change.

In 2000, Senegal witnessed its first change of government from one political party to another. All actors and political observers agreed that women played an important part in the transition. This change resulted in a constitution – its notable gains in terms of acknowledging certain rights of women were noted above. Nonetheless, the challenge remains to implement its provisions, which might be helped through providing education, training, and the continuous consciousness-raising of key actors, among them, first and foremost, the political parties. And the choice made by women's organizations is to appeal to them and to convince them really to adopt, in fact and in practice, affirmative action measures with respect to women. That is what we are working towards every day.

Endnotes

¹ Shvedova, Nadezdha. 1998. *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. Stockholm: International IDEA. pp. 19–34.

² Aminata, Diaw, Aminata, Cissé and Aminata, Kassé. 1999. *Démocratie où es tu*. Senegal, p. 41.