

***Parité* and Women's Historical Participation in Senegalese Politics**

Parité is of course one part of a long history of women's participation in Senegalese politics that has been at times heroic and filled with stories of courageous queens and anti-colonial struggle, and at other times marked by their absence despite their omnipresence. In fact, women's marginality in terms of decision-making aspects of politics in the postcolonial era is what Aminata Diaw (2004) calls the presence-absence paradox, meaning that women have always played essential roles as a "hidden public" (Beck 2003) of mediators of political campaigns, party organizers, and candidate promoters, while men are the primary benefactors of this labor. And similarly, as archival records have shown, women were also crucial to economic stability yet absent from the decision-making that affected macro-economic policies and those that affected their own access to development. Women's mobilizing power is not contested, but their ability to participate in politics in meaningful ways as elected officials is; still, men's political successes are intrinsically linked to women's silent work for the campaigns of their male family members or for a beloved male candidate. In the struggle for women's equal participation in elected positions, the two narratives go hand in hand: The heroic stories of queens and revolutionary women serve to demonstrate that in fact women have always been political in meaningful ways but in reality the day-to-day organizing by ordinary women has made the biggest impact, even if it hasn't directly benefitted them. And yet those heroic stories seem more like myths than clear historical references.

"Power was transmitted through African women," said historian Penda Mbow in a newspaper article spotlighting women in history (Jean-Bart 1990). "In Waalo, the Lingээр, sister or mother of the king and the first wife of the king possessed significant authority. Their political role was even more significant because power could only be passed on to one of the three

matrilineal princes (Mbow 1990).” Penda Mbow has been one of the most engaged historians of women’s history and theorists of gender in Senegalese academia: “The point in which we have always destined women to second rank, always thinking that they needed to be more implicated in economic and social development, we now must reflect on their situation over the *longue durée*.” The *longue durée* of women in politics includes the heroic stories of the women of Ndeer who courageously preferred to burn themselves alive rather than be captured by the Maures, or Djëmbët Mbodj, the queen of Waalo in northern Senegal, and her sister Ndaté Yalla Mbodj who succeeded her; these women are known for their powerful influence in regional politics. Their influence came as guardians of the family wealth, among other strategies. Djëmbët Mbodj, for example, decided to marry the king of Trarza, from across the Senegal River in what is now Mauritania, in order to secure alliances for the two kingdoms in solidarity against potential attacks from the Maures and Toucouleurs (Sarr 1998, 56). Ndaté Yalla’s mother, Fatim Yamar Khouriaye, was an expert strategist and controlled much of the kingdom from 1795 to 1816, when she named her husband Amar Fatim Borso as king of Waalo. She was also among the women of Ndeer who are regarded as anti-colonial heroes (Sarr 2011). Other women such as Yacine Boubou, princess of Kajoor (Sylla 2001), the region and kingdom just south of Waalo that follows the west coastline and includes present-day Dakar, was also influential in regional politics in the mid 18th century. Yacine Boubou was a Lingéer who sacrificed herself in order for her husband, Madior Salla Bigué, to assume his position on the throne of Kajoor (Allou 1966). While some women were crucial to anti-colonial struggles, the elite *signare* women of Saint Louis, the colonial capital of French West Africa, intermarried with European men and thus helped facilitate the trade and diplomacy that led to colonial rule (Jones 2020). During the colonial period, Soukeyna Konaré, the cousin of the first leader of the Senegalese federation

Lamine Gueye, was instrumental not only in helping to elect Lamine Gueye, but was equally involved with mobilizing the women's electorate through her self-named association to fight for women's right to vote in 1945, after being denied the same rights as French women in the metropole in 1944. Gueye, who led the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais, early on understood the importance of women's voting and advocacy power, and with women's newly gained voting rights, he won a resounding victory to become the first black mayor of Saint Louis (Sylla 2001, 58). Although initially engaged with the women's movement, Gueye and other established politicians did not return the favor by investing in women's integration into political positions, meaning that women's main influence remained as voters and propagandists for men's campaigns (62).

Not until 1963, three years after independence, was Caroline Faye Diop elected the first woman representative in Lamine Gueye's parliament, and only in 1973, in the fourth legislature, was another woman elected to a similar position (Sarr 2013, 16). For most of Senegalese post-colonial history, women's privileged contributions to politics would be by way of state-run development projects that sought to capitalize on the abilities of the women's associations mentioned throughout the first half of this chapter.

Much of the action of women in politics began in the 1970s with university and intellectual women's groups such as the association of women pharmacists and the female lawyer's association, Association des Juristes Sénégalaises (AJS). In 1977, at the Ministry-sponsored event Quinzaine de la Femme, an annual commemoration of International Women's Day, the FAFS was launched to support such associations. Towards the end of the 1970s the Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFARD) was conceived as a feminist organization of intellectuals that argued for a "decolonization of

research” (Ellerson 1991) long before the idea of decolonization of knowledge became a buzzword in the western academy. It was thus African feminists who argued against the “intellectual colonialism of the West” and for the production of knowledge about African women by African women. In 1977, a group of leftists led by Marie Angelique Savané, the president of Kiné’s desired, fictive female government, created the women’s political association, Yewwu-Yewwi (We are Awake), a partner organization to her husband Landing Savané’s communist party And Jëf (Mutual Action) (Kane and Kane 2018). Designed as a feminist think-tank, the association awarded prizes to leaders such as Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso, for the promotion of women (24) for speeches such as the one he gave to a crowd of women to celebrate International Women’s Day on March 8, 1987 (Sankara 1990). The speech was just a few months before his assassination, and he called for extending to women the gains of the Burkinabé revolution. Through a regularly published magazine, Yewwu-Yewwi’s goal was to publicize the struggles of women in order to lobby the Senegalese government and public to acknowledge and honor their contributions.

Elite women weren’t the only women who were important to the conversation for independence and post-colonial politics. In fact, many of the first women in parliament were considered illiterate, or rather had not attended French school. Two of them, Arame Diéne and Thioumbé Samb, were children of the Lebou population in Dakar that discouraged girls from attending French school because it would corrupt their sacred native culture and traditions (Fall 2005). Arame Diéne was what Babacar Fall (238) calls “a militant, first in pre-colonial Senegal, then in neo-colonial reform” and was part of the Senegalese Democratic Bloc, which then became the Senegalese Progressive Union, and then joined with the Socialist Party in 1976. Arame Diéne was named by Abdou Diouf as a representative to parliament in 1983. Thioumbé

Samb had a very different political trajectory. She was a radical nationalist and anti-colonialist with the Union Democratique Sénégalaise (UDS) and vice president of the women's movement within the party (Fall 235). She was also a leader of the African Party for Independence (PAI), a Marxist anti-colonial party. When she switched to the Socialist Party in 1983, she was mostly rejected by suspicious party members, because she had been against the party since 1945, and this effectively ended her political career without her being given any significant position in Diouf's administration.

Despite women's sustained engagement in politics, the numbers of women serving in elected positions remained consistently low. For example, when the Union Progressiste Sénégalaise, Senghor's party, became the Parti Socialiste in 1974, the number of women representatives went from four out of 80 to eight out of 100. Only 13 women were elected to the 1983 parliament. By 1988, 18 of the 120 representatives were women. And yet in the 1993 legislature the numbers dropped from 18 to 14 (Ndiaye, date unknown) (Ndiaye 1998). In this context the efforts of civil society shifted from mostly economic development to women's political representation in order to facilitate decisions about development policies. As noted in the introductory chapter, the representative from Keur Masar, Aissatou Daouda Dia, made an important distinction that "you can't do development without politics, and you can't do politics without development" and in this context COSEF was founded in 1995, with the mission to pass legislation for equal representation of men and women in elected positions, *parité*. The next section will look at COSEF and other participants in the *parité* movement.

Parité Law

The first law of *parité* was rejected on the basis that the constitution already

stipulated that men and women are equal. After several years and revisions with constitutional experts, the law passed in the Senegalese parliament and was signed by President Wade on May 28, 2010. It was a historic event in Senegalese political history and marked the advocacy achievements of organizations for women's and human rights, as well as the achievements of influential women who held considerable positions in small and large political parties. It also proved the weight of women's voting power. In the early 2000s, in an article entitled "Local Administration Rebels against Feminism," Macky Sall—Minister of Energy at the time—said "I do not believe in *parité*. It is not realistic" (Sow Ba n.d.). But by the time he became president in 2012 and it was up to him to ensure that *parité* was applied, he had changed his tune.

A majority of parties long had women's sections led by women, and a smaller group of parties had instituted their own internal gender quotas: The Union Progressiste Sénégalaise (UPS), parent party to the Parti Socialiste, established a quota of 25% women, which saw Caroline Faye Diop elected as the first woman to parliament in 1963. She also was included in Diouf's cabinet of ministers in 1978. However, the law was important in mandating that all parties include women as viable candidates. The first article of the law mandates absolute parity of men and women—equal parts—in all elected and semi-elected institutions. The second article requires all party candidate lists to be composed of alternating sexes, otherwise it will be rejected by the commission of elections. This second article was crucial, given the nature of party composition and electoral rules. For parliamentary elections, there are two types of representatives: those who represent a local district and those who represent national interests generally. The national list requires 60 candidates from each party; the departmental lists depend upon population size. Regardless, all lists are mandated to respect the *parité* law requiring alternating male and female candidates. If a man is head of the list, the second in line must be a

woman, continuing to alternate down the list in a similar fashion, an important requirement since previously parties with gender quotas could simply put all of the women candidates towards the bottom, giving them almost no chance of election. Each party has a sheet with the names of each candidate according to the number of districts and national representative spots, in hopes that if the party wins enough votes, the majority of their members, proportional to the votes, take seats. Priority is given to the first name, the head of the list, and then others follow based on importance. The ballot displays image and party colors for easy recognition. At the polling place, voters are asked to choose the campaign flyers of each party from which they will cast one ballot. Therefore, voters choose representatives by party and leader, not by individuals within a party. For each 10,000 votes, a party wins an individual seat in parliament. This factor means that parties construct their lists, and lists that technically respect the *parité* law can still end up favoring male candidates, depending on who is at the head of the list. The 2017 parliamentary elections, for example, had a record number of 47 registered parties and coalitions; of these, only four were led by women, with a male candidate in second position. Because there were so many parties, several parties only had their the head of the list elected, and these were overwhelmingly men. In the case of a district with only three representatives, *parité* was impossible, and usually also favored men.

Parité: Its Supporters and Opponents

On Wednesday, November 4, 2009, just a few months before parliament voted to establish the *parité* law, *Le soleil* published a debate with the title “Grave consequences of the fight for equality of the sexes and parity for western society (Daour 2009).” The author makes

numerous connections between the wish for equality and parity and feminism, that has “constructed itself against men, against the patriarch, against established order, but also against femininity and against the profound identity of the woman by wishing to place her at the same level as men.” The author cited the fiftieth anniversary of the French *parité* movement, during which many members lamented the issues and regrets they had about unforeseen consequences of their own liberation. These examples reflected a fear that laws such as *parité* were aiming to turn Senegalese women into western women and Senegalese society into western democracies. Another article questioned whether imposing quotas would “twist the neck of democracy (S.D 1998).” Yet another article in August 2010 documenting an event on “Islam and *Parité* in General” called for “women to avoid all copying of western practices of *parité* between men and women” and reminded the women in attendance that “men remain the head of the household (Aps 2010).”

Other arguments against *parité* claimed that it was in contradiction to finding competent and qualified women and men. Mandating *parité* meant dumbing down the elected institutions. This was partly to discredit women as being unqualified, and to mask the reality that men-dominated parties felt threatened by women’s presence. In addition, as Fatou Sow mentioned to me in an interview, “They don’t want capable, intelligent women so that they can manipulate us (Sow 2017).” I heard this line of thinking many times as women themselves struggled to shake off critiques of the *parité* law. Instead of changing the hearts and minds of Senegalese citizens by proving the substance of the women recently elected to parliament, women were talked about in terms of being ineffectual, immature, and unprofessional, as well as lacking serious capacity for the job. It was difficult to tell, however, how they could be effective and have the necessary experience if the majority vote of their male colleagues excluded women from critical cabinet

positions with real decision-making impact. One of the most outspoken critics of the law, representative El Hadj Diouf, argued that one's nomination should be based on "competency and merit, not a juxtaposition between men and women" that was created by "feminists who wanted to take this country hostage" (Xalima News, August 7, 2012). He made these comments in the context of his proposal years later to annul *parité*. At some point during the 12th legislature, which began in 2012, newspapers, popular discourse, and even representatives themselves began referring to the legislature as "*le plus nul*" or the most unintelligent or incompetent since the first national assembly in 1963. No real measure or evidence can back this claim; however, the statement mostly reflects the opposition to more women in parliament. The majority of men I spoke with during the 2017 election were under the impression that women could not be taken seriously in government because they were unprofessional in their approach to politics, hinting at women's conduct of family ceremonies. Their fear was that these practices would infiltrate politics, forgetting that women had been instrumental in men's campaigns that employed similar tactics.

France had its own *parité* movement that began during the last decade of the twentieth century and became law in 2005. Opposition to *parité* and to women's representation in politics in France and Senegal reflected drastically different ideas of what it means to be a citizen and, therefore, the political representation of those citizens. In the French context, those who resisted *parité* argued that it challenged universalist ideas of representation that supposedly paid no attention to sex or gender (Scott 2005), to do with the fundamental ideas in France being of the citizen as an abstract collective instead of individuals with particular characteristics (gender, religion, ethnicity). I argue that in the Senegalese case, the hostility towards *parité*—and women's continued presence in state politics—has had more to do with *what* Senegalese women

represent, rather than *who*. In stark contrast to the French Republican philosophy that politicians were not recognized for personal accolades but for their commitment to upholding the principles of the Republic, Senegalese culture and politics is very much about the individual politician's qualities, genealogy, and the personal reproduction of specific cultural values. Critiques of women in politics follow a similar pattern. In the French case, a law such as *parité* meant highlighting differences such as gender and sex, thus disturbing the abstract individual. In Senegal, *parité* has meant bringing in women to state politics, in spite of conceptions that women themselves would pollute the governing processes. While Senegalese women are praised by some for their generous and hospitable tendencies, these tactics are seen as irresponsible, unprofessional, and antiquated, especially as political strategy. Women are not simply joining the ranks of state politics or somehow symbolizing the domestic space that is the cause of public objection to them—although in reality that is part of it: Their form of “doing politics” threatens the modern model of an aspiring Senegalese Republic. Aminata Diaw critiques Rousseau's assertion that (French) women's presence in public creates a kind of disorder, likening the excesses of wine consumption with women's disruption of political public space (2009). It is hard not to make the connection with the debates about the excesses of *teraanga* and family ceremonies, and women turning government into what I often heard referred to as *folklorique*, or cultural performances of song and dance that are visual displays of excess. Although women were often the *animatrices folkloriques* of men's political campaigns, once the party was over, men went on with the business of politics, leaving women behind (Sylla 2001).