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## Grassroots Education as A Catalyst for Women's Representation (Activism) in Political Bodies in Benin

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### Abstract

This research work deals with the place of women in the political changes that Benin is experiencing in an environment of socio-political pluralism as well as basic education as its catalytic factor. A purely documentary approach supported by a descriptive analysis made it possible to conduct this research. The data used were collected via the internet, press reviews, study reports and databases of the autonomous national electoral commission. The results revealed that there is a very low level of activism of women in the political environment that can lead to their accession to certain positions. However, the rare women who achieve this are educated. The reforms and various actions undertaken have nevertheless led to some progress and indirectly confirmed the thesis relating to the influences of the level of education. However, the problem of the participation of women in the animation of political life in Benin, in perpetual change, remains a major concern and strongly challenges women but also the political class, given that the existing statistics are very unencouraging. It seems important to implement actions to strengthen current reforms and to boost awareness-raising actions aimed at political decision-makers. Better still, it would be interesting to encourage women executives and elites in society to become more involved in the country's political life. Training on leadership and female political activism would also help to breathe new life into the process. Mechanisms to encourage women to join public affairs, coupled with the development of literacy policies for women in rural areas, would allow them to more easily integrate into the political environment and actively participate in the development of the nation. Finally, as with legislative contests, MPs could legislate in favor of positive discrimination in favor of women in the context of local elections.

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Gender, political activism, socio-political pluralism, Benin.

## **Introduction**

The participation of women in political life and their positioning in high social spheres is a subject of interest in developing countries such as Benin. Many institutions are therefore constantly looking into the issue in order to identify factual elements that can help to drive a certain dynamic of gender change in a male-dominated environment. Among many other catalytic factors is grassroots education. Clearly, it is a solution to representativeness.

According to a report by the [Inter-Parliamentary Union for Democracy \(2020\)](#), much work remains to be done in terms of women's participation in political actions, although statistics reveal progress, indicating that just over 10% of the world's countries are now led by a woman. Also, twenty (20) countries have women heads of state and government in 2020, compared to nineteen (19) in 2019 and as of January 1, 2020, women represented 6.6% of elected heads of state (10 out of 152) and 6.2% of heads of government (12 out of 193). According to data from the [Inter-Parliamentary Union's Map of Women in Politics \(2020\)](#), as of January 2020, the average percentage of women ministers in Africa was 21.45% and there were only 13 African women ministers of health. Despite this bitter observation, some hopeful feats have been noted. This is illustrated by the case of Ethiopia, which made history by inaugurating its first cabinet with perfect parity between male and female ministers. The country thus had 47.6% women ministers. Following Ethiopia's decision, Rwanda embarked a few weeks later on the same path by forming a government with 53.6% women ministers ([Ssuuna, 2018](#)). Countries such as South Africa and Guinea-Bissau have also established parity governments and Seychelles came close with 45.5% women ministers. As for the legislative branch, which requires more involvement and commitment from women themselves, the observation is practically the same since in 2020, the average percentage of women sitting in African parliaments is 22.5%. Also, in 2022, it was noted for the first time, the absence of parliament without women in the world and the average in terms of representation of women in sub-Saharan Africa, in parliaments, for the years 1995 and 2023 is +16.7% ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995 and 2023](#)). Coming to the specific case of political parties, African women occupy only 12% of the six highest positions in the hierarchy of political parties in power and in the opposition and only 7% of women occupy the highest political positions (presidents, vice-presidents, prime ministers and deputy prime ministers) across the

continent despite all the efforts made for real progress ([Africa Barometer, 2021](#)). In the Republic of Benin, one of the first countries to embark early on the path to democracy in Africa, the rate of representation of women in parliament had never reached 10% until recently. At the end of the legislative elections of January 8, 2023, there are now 28 women out of the 109 deputies for the 9th legislature (2023-2026), a rate of 25.69%, compared to 7.23% of women elected for the 8th legislature (2019-2023). This progress is recorded thanks to the reform initiated in 2019 through the revision of the Constitution of December 11, 1990 in its article 26 and of the electoral code in its article 144 which sets the number of deputies in the National Assembly at one hundred and nine (109) including twenty-four (24) seats exclusively reserved for women ([UNDP, 2023](#)).

Despite the reforms or various actions and some successes recorded, the problem of women's participation in the animation of political life in Benin remains and strongly challenges given that the existing statistics are less encouraging. This situation therefore deserves that the following concern be raised: What place do women occupy in political changes in Benin in the era of socio-political pluralism? What is the education profile of women in politics in Benin? To respond adequately to this concern, this article proposes to make an analysis of women's activism in the Beninese political context on the one hand and the participation of the female gender in socio-political pluralism in Benin, and to establish their education profile on the other hand using evidence-based data. It is organized into five parts including the introduction, the state of knowledge, the methodological approach, the results and the discussion as well as the conclusion and political suggestions.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study was based on the exploitation of documents and databases relating to the organization of the country's political life. It consisted of carrying out a comparative reading of the characteristic facts of women's political activism before and after the reform of the party system. The analysis of the political achievements of women in political life provides information on the role they had played and helps to understand current developments. The document also used the results of survey data relating to the obstacles to women's participation in public life in Benin. By the way, the data on women in political life that were collected via different channels such as the internet, press reviews, electronic messages, study reports, databases of the National Autonomous

Electoral Commission (CENA) to be able to reconstruct the said facts. The said data, cleaned, processed and then corrected as needed, made it possible to describe, on the one hand, the situation of women in politics and to take stock of the level of formal education of women elected to political bodies (Town Halls and National Assembly) during the last electoral contests. These analyses translated into graphs were carried out using Excel 2024 software.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results were presented and discussed according to the data that could be mobilized. It should be noted that the availability of data was a handicap that was no less negligible for an in-depth analysis of the subject addressed. Thus, the analysis of the results mainly focused on the participation of women in political life, their accession to certain political positions and then the level of formal education of the latter in the Republic of Benin. This situation therefore led to the fact that the activism of Beninese women was reduced and confused with the simple expression of their accession to certain political positions in the results presented here. The availability of statistics on the defense of political beliefs by women and their direct role in the animation of political parties would also be necessary to enrich and strengthen these analyses. In view of this, the architecture of the analyses carried out on these results is as follows: (i) analyses of data relating to local and municipal elections [Elected councilors; (ii) Elected mayors] followed by those of legislative elections [(iii) Elected deputies.] (iv-State of the level of formal education of elected women in political bodies.

### **Analyses of data relating to local and municipal elections [(i) Elected councilors; (ii) Elected mayors] and legislative elections [(iii) Elected deputies]**

The graphs below summarize the different variations obtained:

This figure shows that from 2002 to 2022, better in four terms, out of 5,884 elected municipal councilors, only 243 women were able to succeed in being elected as municipal councilors, or 4.13% of councilors for all terms combined. In other words, out of 100 elected councilors, only 4 women are there compared to 96 men, but according to RGPH 4 data, the Beninese population is predominantly female with a representation of 51.2%. Despite this majority, a cross-analysis of the data sufficiently shows the low or almost non-existent

presence of women in the sphere of political decision-making at the local level. The most numerous are the least represented.

Figure 2 shows an evolution in the number of women elected as municipal councilors over the last four terms of office in Benin. It clearly shows an increasing evolution from 2002 to 2020, reaching 36 women elected in 2002 compared to 72 women elected as councilors in 2020. An analysis of the increase in the number of women elected reveals an increase rate of 73.68% between 2002 and 2008; of 1.51% between 2008 and 2015 and 7.46% between 2015 and 2020 with a general growth rate of 89.47% between 2002 and 2020. These statistics show the positive evolution of women's involvement in the management of public action and this could be seen as a positive sign for women's political activism at the municipal level in the Republic of Benin, which would testify to their constantly noted presence in the political chessboard and the animation of political parties. This presence gives them the opportunity to participate more and more actively in political decisions at the municipal level and will be able to make gender-sensitive, the dynamics of socio-political pluralism in the country. However, it should be noted that there was a decline in the growth rate of the number of women elected between the transition from the first term to the second compared to the others. Better still, with each transition of mandates, although the number of elected women increases, the rate of elected women experiences a sawtooth variation. From one mandate to another, the variation is not significant. These findings require analyses of the real impacts of political reforms on the issue of women in politics with regard to local and municipal elections. In all likelihood, it is to be feared that a decline in the dynamism of the female gender in political decisions is feared. In this case, it will therefore be necessary to pay particular attention to the effectiveness of political choices in favor of women in order to correct the weaknesses and inadequacies revealed by the statistics.

Furthermore, a breakdown by electoral district would allow for a comparative analysis to be carried out in order to discuss the spatio-temporal dynamics of this variable.

Focusing on the position of Mayor and his deputies, figures 2, 3 and 4 below present the gender profile.

Figure 3 shows that the female gender is very weakly represented in the three positions (Mayor, 1st Deputy

Mayor and 2nd Deputy Mayor) during the first two terms (2002; 2008). Indeed, the female gender is represented with a rate of 4% in the position of Mayor and 2nd Deputy Mayor and 3% in the position of 1st Deputy Mayor. The male gender displays its perfect dominance, with rates of 96%, 97% and 96% respectively for the position of Mayor, 1st Deputy Mayor and 2nd Deputy Mayor. These results show that the territorial anchoring at the municipal level of women as subjects and actors of activism and socio-political pluralism is quite limited.

Figure 4 above reveals that the female gender is very weakly represented in the position of Mayor for the third term. Indeed, the female gender is represented by 1% compared to 99% for the male gender. In the position of 1st Deputy Mayor for the third term, the female gender records a score of 7% while the male gender still dominates with 93%. In the position of 2nd Deputy Mayor for the third term, the female gender records a score of 3% and the male gender 97%. A cross-reference with the first two terms shows a downward dynamic for the position of Mayor and 2nd Deputy Mayor. Indeed, from a rate of 4% in 2002 and 2008, the female gender fell to 1% in 2015. That is a decline of 3%. In the position of second deputy mayor, a decline of 1% is noted. Only the position of first deputy mayor has seen a change of 4%, going from 3% during the first two terms of office to 7% in the third term. These statistics are a diagnosis against municipal female political activism, which declined between 2008 and 2015. Female political actors were therefore unable to sufficiently influence their accession to the positions of Mayor and second deputy mayor. It is a question of analyzing the socio-political constraints that could justify these findings.

However, in the fourth term of office, the statistics (figure 5) show some progress. Indeed, the position of Mayor, which declined in 2015, was able to rise by 4%, returning to its level of the first two terms of office. As for the position of 2nd Deputy Mayor, a significant increase has been observed, going from 3% in 2015 to 8% in 2020. Women were therefore more active during the political elections of this period and were therefore able to reaffirm their commitment to activism and socio-political pluralism at the municipal level in Benin.

Although still weak compared to developed countries, the dynamics of women's activism observed at the heart of socio-political pluralism in Benin in terms of local and municipal elections poses a problem of integrating the gender approach into the provisions undertaken in the political field in order to reverse this virtual non-

existence of women at these levels of political decision-making. The mixed results recorded show sufficiently that there is still a long way to go to successfully reverse the situation in favor of women. Better still, this fact gives rise to many reflections that could call for a model for transplanting the provisions made for women in the context of legislative elections. The establishment of positive discrimination in favor of women could be considered through a law amending the electoral code in force in Benin. This reflection is motivated by the latest results obtained at the level of the legislative electoral contests of January 2023 through the obvious recording of a progress which is undoubtedly attributable to certain changes in the political field known at the advent of the reform of the partisan system which favors groupings of political parties and allows to blossom in a larger group, more potentialities of the female gender but for the most part this progress is attributable to positive discrimination in favor of women prescribed by the electoral code since 2019. It can also be interpreted that the institution of a minimum quota of representation of women has also contributed to obtaining these results. This is noted in particular through the comparison of the positioning of women during the last five legislative elections.

Overall, the statistics in Figure 6 indicate that for all years combined, with the exception of the period 2015-2019, the number of women placed in second position is higher than the number placed in first and third position. However, it should be noted that for all terms of office combined, the last term of office recorded the lowest rates of positioning of women for both the first, second and third positions for the quest for seats in the National Assembly. It should be noted that despite the existence of these unsatisfactory statistics on the positioning of women on the lists of candidates for the legislative elections, it may be suspected, in addition to other causes, that it is the existence of the multitude of political parties during this period that has certainly generated the low representation of women in parliament. Indeed, the ratio compared to men shows a significant difference and could leave doubts about the real political intentions of men in favor of women that have not necessarily translated into facts and therefore could not impact the results. This stagnation is certainly part of the elements of the diagnostic analysis that led to the political reforms carried out with a direct effect of positive discrimination for the positioning of women on the lists from 2023.

Figure 7 shows that from 2023, thanks to the measures contained in the new electoral code in force, and that

despite the fact that the number of women placed for example in first position on the lists of legislative elections has experienced a relative decline compared to other years, there is a strong presence of women on the list driven by the quota of representation of women.

With this progress, the number of women representing the population in the National Assembly was the highest in the 9th legislature (2023-2026) as shown in Figure 8 above. This fact comes from the obligation of a minimum number of women deputies enshrined in the new electoral code. This is undoubtedly a step forward but does not reflect a socio-political conquest of the female gender whose leadership remains to be affirmed. It is noted that apart from this provision requiring political parties to have a minimum representation of the female gender, women have not been able to establish their leadership in order to have a significant number significantly higher than that which is instituted. Thus, efforts still need to be made for a greater dynamic of political activism of the female gender in Benin.

Socio-cultural norms are undoubtedly one of the many reasons that could explain these findings, especially in a country like Benin where there are prejudices, sociological constraints and cultural realities that are detrimental to the political emancipation of women. Clearly, women are faced with socio-cultural obstacles, challenges in terms of formal education that hinder their activism and political activism.

Certainly, many efforts are made through community awareness raising at the grassroots level and capacity building is organized for the benefit of women who go into politics so that they regain self-confidence to reduce these constraints. But the results remain very mixed. In summary, the results revealed a political environment marked by limited and very weak activism of women in politics in terms of access to certain positions.

With reforms and various actions, some successes have been recorded. However, the problem of women's participation in the animation of political life in Benin, in perpetual change, remains and strongly challenges given that the existing statistics are very unencouraging.

The present results are not far from those in the literature. In particular those of [Fanou \(2020\)](#) and [Nation \(2019\)](#) who showed the same inadequacy in the positioning of women in politics. The latter also indicate that this reality of male predominance in political life is also observed at the level of local elected officials. And

as proof, out of the 77 mayors and 83 deputies in the country, there are respectively only four and six who are female, that is to say representation rates of 3% and 7% in parliament and in local authorities. [UN Women \(2024\)](#) also recognizes this situation based on a report stating that at the beginning of 2023, Benin ranked 169th in the world in terms of women's parliamentary representation before rising to 87th place at the end of the year.

The analyses of the [UNDP \(2023\)](#) also go in the same direction as that of these authors because they indicate that the participation of women overall, still remains at a low level and the program supports this with the data from the local and legislative elections already specified in this article. However, it did not fail to draw attention in another article in 2023, to the progress that Benin has recorded in terms of women's representation in parliament. He indicates to this effect that in the Republic of Benin, the rate of representation of women in parliament had never reached 10% until the recent past when 25.69% was obtained in 2023 thanks to political reforms undertaken.

#### **Status of the level of formal education of elected women in political bodies**

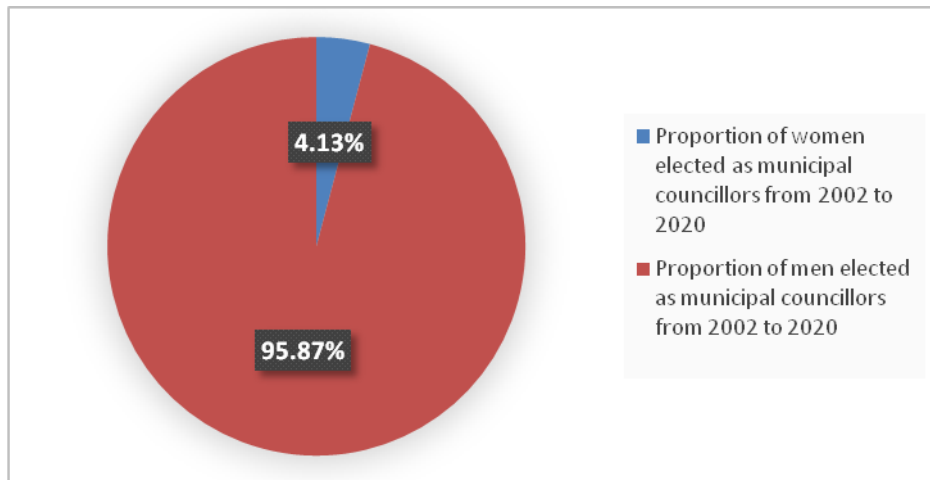
It is known that it is the political parties that are responsible for recruiting, selecting candidates and deciding on the issues that will appear in their program. However, all things being equal, and focusing on the place occupied by the level of formal education in the choice of women, the data collected for the last local, communal and legislative elections in Benin allow us to draw different conclusions not only on the local elections but also the legislative one.

#### **Level of education of elected women in the 4th term of the communal elections**

Of all the women councilors elected during the fourth term of the municipal elections, it appears that a small proportion (16/72) were appointed either mayor or to one of the positions of deputy mayor. Of this small proportion of elected women, there is a predominance of women with a high level of education, that is to say 56.3% with a level higher than the Baccalaureate compared to 43.8% whose level is imprecise.

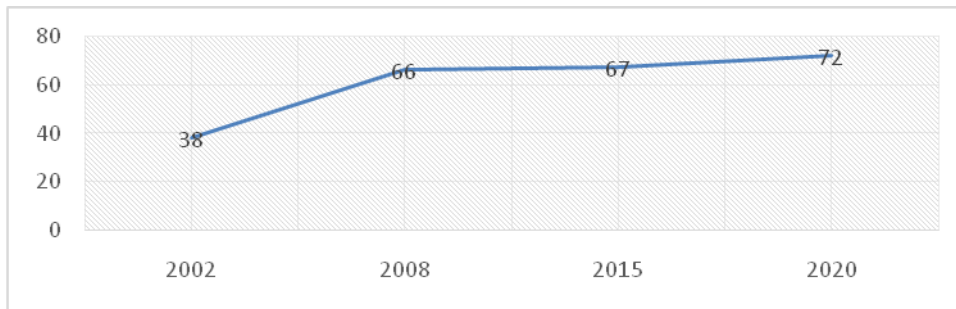
This result shows that the level of education contributes to the choice and positioning of the candidate on the lists of the various political parties in Benin, better for their promotion to high decision-making spheres.

**Figure.1** Proportion of women elected as councillors in municipal elections (2002-2020)



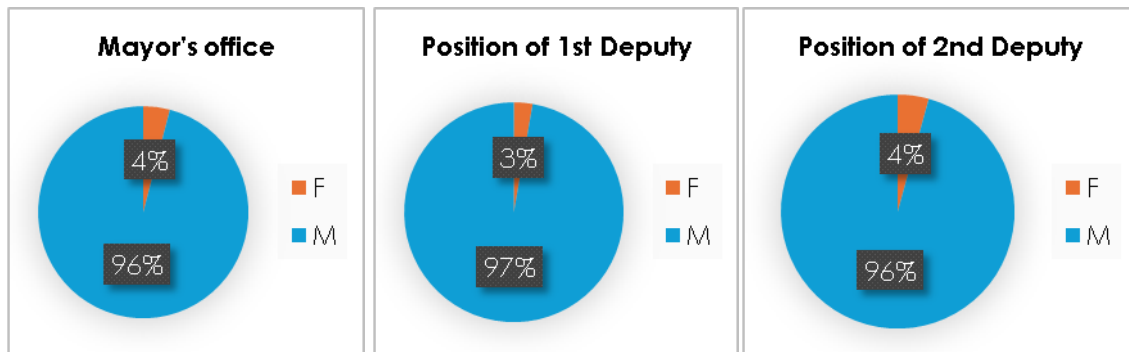
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

**Figure.2** Number of women elected as councillors in municipal elections (2002-2020)



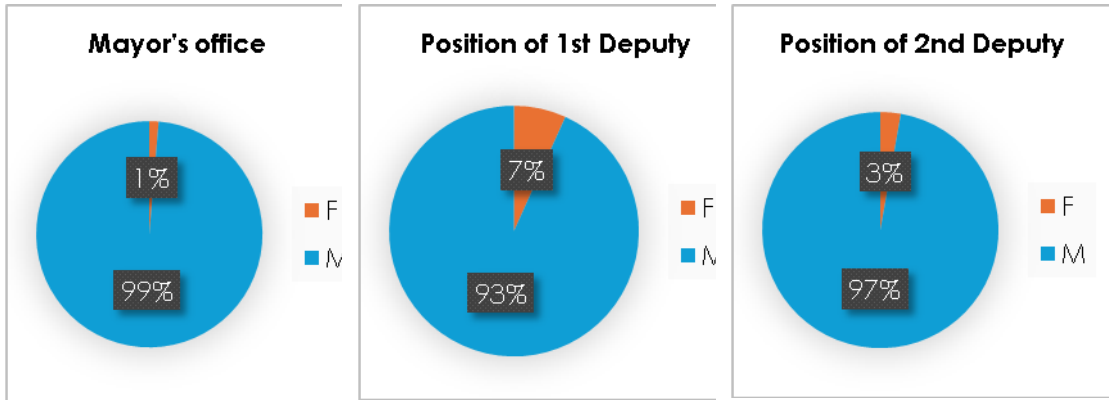
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

**Figure.3** Gender profile 1st and 2nd term (2002 and 2008)



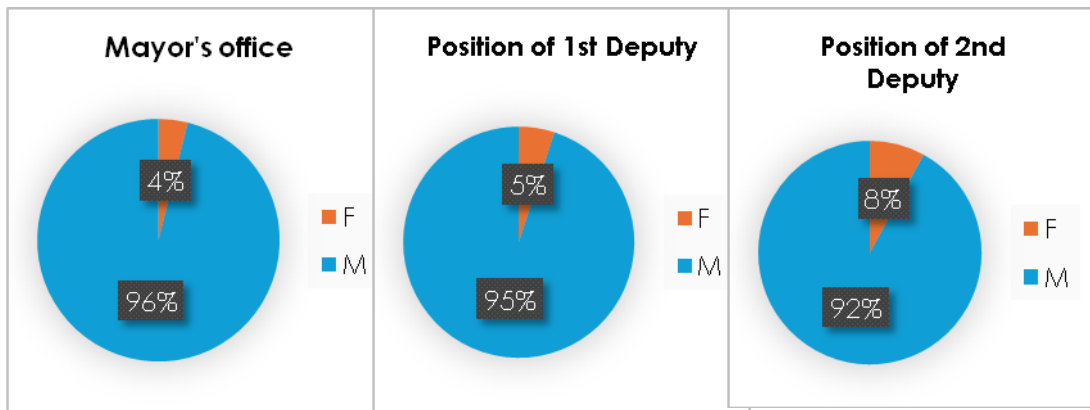
Source: calculation based on CENA data

Figure.4 Gender profile 3rd term (2015)



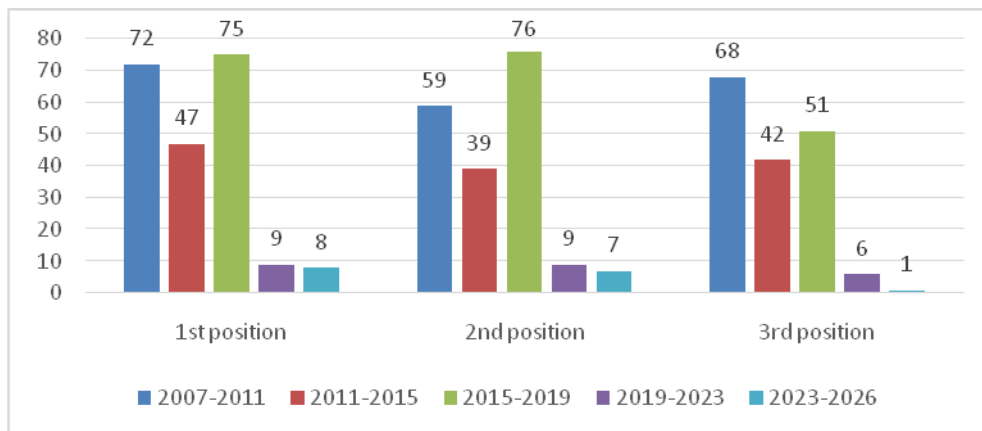
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

Figure.5 Gender profile 4th term (2020)



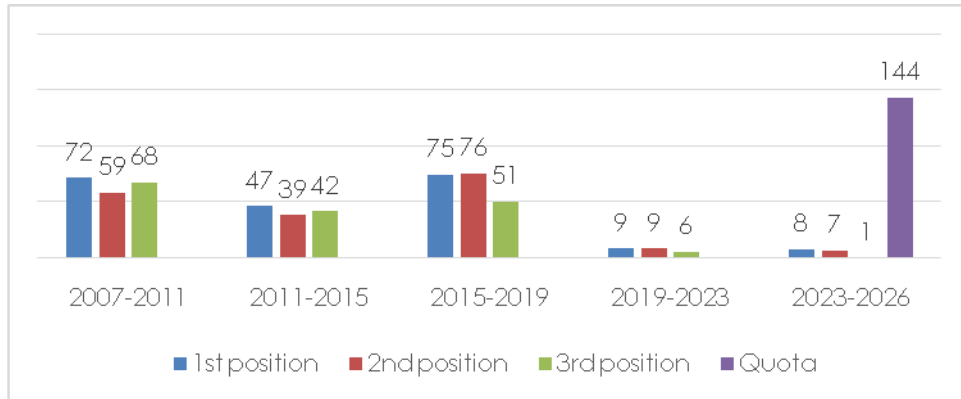
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

Figure.6 Positioning of women during the last 5 legislative elections



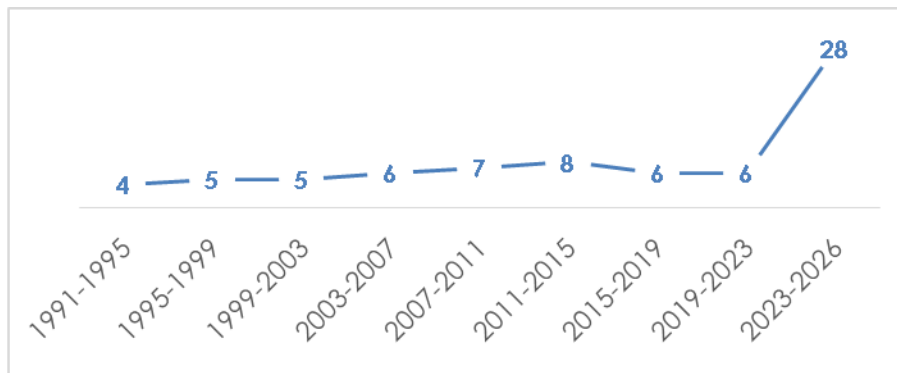
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

**Figure.7** Positioning of women during the last 5 legislative elections with the representation quota imposed by the new electoral code



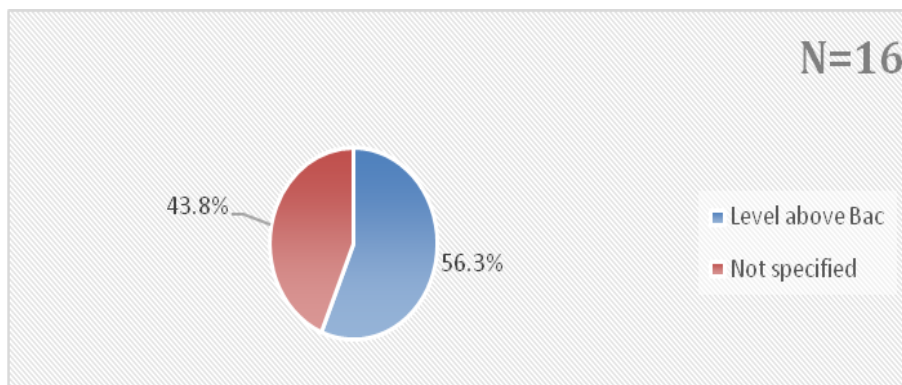
Source: Authors, based on CENA data

**Figure.8** Number of women elected as deputies



Source: Authors, based on CENA data

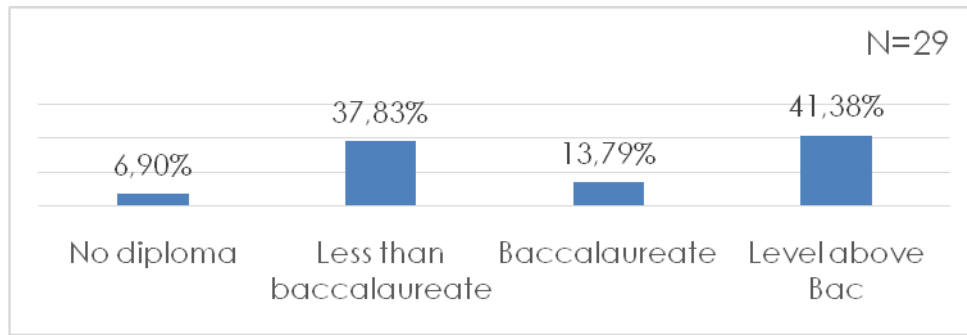
**Figure.9** Status of the level of education of women councilors elected as mayor or deputy mayor



Source: Authors, based on CENA data



**Figure.10** Status of the level of education of women in the National Assembly



Source: Authors, based on CENA data

### Level of education of women elected to the National Assembly

Figure 10 shows that the majority of women in the National Assembly are educated with varying levels of education. It is also established that among educated women, there are more elected women with a level of education higher than the Baccalaureate, i.e. design executives.

In short, based on data from the last legislative elections in 2023, it should be noted that in the National Assembly, the level of formal education is hardly neglected by the parties represented, neither in designating the deputies who benefit from the discrimination measures brought by the law amending the electoral code in force nor in the positioning of women on the lists. It could be deduced that formal education also plays a catalytic role in the representation of women in politics.

### Conclusion and Policy Suggestion

The objective of this work was to analyze the place occupied by women and the importance of formal education for women in the political changes that Benin is experiencing in an environment of socio-political pluralism. A purely descriptive and documentary approach made it possible to achieve this objective. In short, it should be noted that, whatever the position considered at the municipal level, the male gender is the most dominant with a rate always higher than 90%.

However, the female gender is increasingly represented when we move in a decreasing manner from the position of Mayor to the position of 2nd deputy mayor. This deserves to be improved by the institution of a law of positive discrimination allowing women to better

position themselves at the head of the municipalities of our country where male predominance is evident. In addition, for both municipal, local and national political bodies, the level of education of women plays a preeminent role. From 2023, the number of women placed on the lists of the legislative elections has experienced a relative evolution compared to other years with no less negligible results thanks to the specific position added on the list for a woman in each constituency.

Even though this increase linked to positioning was already slightly noticed from the period 2015-2019, it resulted in a non-negligible result in terms of the representation of women in the National Assembly. However, the ratio compared to men is not brilliant. Much work remains to be done to reverse this trend.

Also, the results showed that the number of women representing the population in the National Assembly was the highest in Benin in the 9th legislature (2023-2026). This comes from the obligation to position on the electoral list of a minimum number of women deputies enshrined in the new electoral code. Despite this upward trajectory marked by an awareness of the need to have better representation of the people by women, it is noted that only legislative constraints have allowed Benin to make a leap.

Mechanically, the position of the woman reserved by electoral constituency returned to the political party having obtained a majority in a constituency. This will mean that by jumping this legislative lock, the situation has only experienced a timid evolution illustrated by barely 4 to 5 women positioned at the top of the list in their political party for the 3 political parties which are in parliament. However, for the level of education, the qualitative leap is noted among the women deputies

present at the National Assembly regardless of the designation mechanism. Overall, it can be noted that the Beninese political environment is marked by a very low participation of women in the animation of political life and their accession to certain positions is very mixed despite the reforms undertaken by the government. It seems important to carry out actions to consolidate current reforms and increase awareness.

The said awareness will go to women, political actors who directly influence political decision-making. Awareness can also be done for the benefit of the grassroots populations in order to lift the veil on socio-cultural norms that constitute apparent barriers.

Also, it would be interesting to encourage women executives and elites of society to become more involved in the political life of the country. Training on leadership and female political activism would also help to breathe new life into it.

Mechanisms to encourage women to join public affairs, coupled with the development of literacy policies for women in rural areas, would make it easier for them to integrate into the political sphere and actively participate in the development of the nation. Finally, as with legislative contests, MPs could legislate in favor of positive discrimination in favor of women in the context of local elections.

Finally, this analysis could have been further developed if more data related to women's activism in politics and their participation in political positions were available. In perspective, an exploration collecting primary data on a

sample of politically active women activists would be beneficial to enrich the analyses with evidence.

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