

# Women as political actors

Formal criteria and informal dynamics in electing women councillors in Niger

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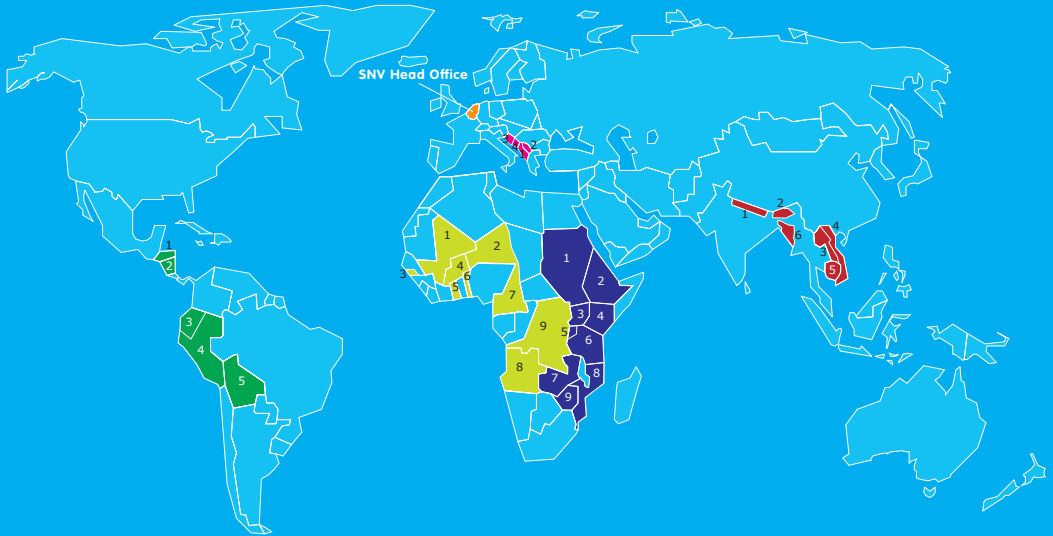
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# Abstract

**Women stood for the municipal council elections in Niger in 2004. But are women only chosen as 'tokens' because of the quota system or what factors affected their election? This paper analyses the experiences of the women elected in municipal councils by looking at the formal criteria and informal dynamics that influenced their election. The research demonstrates how the women used predominantly informal dynamics in their campaigns and exploited their access to the private domain of voters and their various networks as a major source for support.**

## 1 Introduction

Over the past decade the international women's movement has pressed for equal representation of women and men in political and public office. The inequitable representation and participation of women in institutional structures persists because of the continued absence of women voices in governance (UNDP, 2000:5). Apart from the fact that women constitute half the population, which would in itself justify a more equal division of positions, it is also believed that increased involvement of women in decision making bodies and processes would influence the legitimacy of decisions taken.

The Fourth International Conference of Women in Beijing (1995) laid out guidelines for increasing the political representation of women, as formulated in its Platform of Actions. Various countries who ratified the Platform of Actions, have introduced a quota system so as to stimulate women's participation and to work towards a more equal representation in political and public functions.<sup>1</sup> Niger accepted a legislative quota system in 2000 in order to increase the participation

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1 By 2003, thirty one countries instituted legal quotas at national level and sixteen instituted quotas at regional and local level (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2003 in Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004:25)

of women. This paved the way for women to engage in local politics, and prepare themselves for the municipal elections in 2004.

The issue of access to and representation of women in local institutions goes together with discussions on local governance. Where countries have opted for reforms that are aimed at decentralization and devolution of government, it is believed that governance will be more participatory, accountable and responsive to citizens. The standard argument is as follows. Decentralisation is meant to create lower thresholds and more opportunities for community groups to raise their voice and influence the position of local elites, where these elites dominate political processes. Decisions, it is argued, will be more based on local communities' interests and needs. Often, it is also assumed that local level-government will be more concerned with social equity and that it will stimulate pro-poor policies in those areas where a large percentage of the population lives in absolute poverty, because poor people will be involved in local development processes. It therefore would also offer women opportunities to become more involved and put their interests on the development agenda (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004).

Reality however appears to be more complex. It is questionable whether with increased decentralization, a real challenge can be posed to local elites who are resistant to or uninterested in development or pro-poor policies (Crook, 2003). This is especially so where there is a lack of distinction between public and private spheres and where social and political relations are based on and accepted as personalized bonds of reciprocity where all have an interest (Chabal and Daloz, 1999:29). Women who enter the political arena are often seen as the ones who could challenge the existing patriarchal elite.

However, not only do women have to play by the rules of the game to maintain their position in the political party and as a member of a municipal council, but their relations might also be based on personalized bonds and reciprocity.

Azza Karam (UNDP, 2000:23) writes: "... perceptions of women are closely connected to a traditional understanding of space as private and public, women generally being relegated to the former, even to the exclusion of the latter. These notions are remarkably persistent

and lie at the very heart of most of the difficulties women face not only entering politics, but achieving credibility and impact within the system". This research shows how women exploited different strategies so as to maximise the space given to them within the patriarchal system and thereby started challenging the existing patriarchal relationships that dominate the local politics.

In order to understand the position of women councillors, this research explores the formal and informal dynamics that led to their election. In this paper formal refers to the criteria stipulated in the electoral code.<sup>2</sup> These include a minimum age of twenty-five, being registered at the council, obtaining an identity card and not having a criminal record. Informal dynamics are mechanisms that are not formally referred to in the electoral process, but strengthen the chances of the candidates in elections: family status, education, political involvement, membership or positions in organisations, family connections, valued social relations in the community, and financial situation. The paper further examines how the quota is applied in the municipal elections.

### **Niger in context**

Niger has a multi party system. Its foundation was laid down in the National Conference in July 1991, when it was decided to pave the way for a multi party democracy and to prepare for the adaptation of a new constitution and the holding of free and fair elections, which were held in 1993.<sup>3</sup> In May 1991 women marched successfully in the streets of Niamey to reinforce their demand for participation in the conference.<sup>4</sup>

Formally the Government of Niger is committed to international conventions that promote empowerment of women and gender equity, like the Platform of Actions that resulted from the Fourth International Conference of Women in Beijing (1995) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW)<sup>5</sup> which it ratified in

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2 République du Niger, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante, Code Electoral, Edition 1998 The "code électoral" states the procedures and regulations regarding the different levels of elections, including the municipal elections

3 Background Note: [www.historycentral.com/nationbynation/Niger](http://www.historycentral.com/nationbynation/Niger)

4 After the march, 13 May was declared as the National Women's Day of Niger, referring to the success of the march

1999, albeit with some reservations.<sup>6</sup> In 1996, a national policy was developed for the promotion of women, followed by the installation of an “observatoire” for the promotion of women in 1999.

Even though the constitution talks about equal rights for men and women, it took a long campaign by the women’s movement and lobbying with various influential actors in parliament and civil society, before the president signed the law on the quota system in June 2000<sup>7</sup>. The quota system is a legislative system: 10% of the elective positions and 25% of the nominations of government positions have to be for either sex. In reality it is used as a minimum of respective 10% and 25% for women, like table 1 demonstrates.

*Table 1: Percentage of female candidates per region in the 2004 elections in Niger.<sup>8</sup>*

	Agadez	Diffa	Dosso	<b>Maradi</b>	Tahoua	Tillabéri	Zinder	Niamey	Total
Male and female candidates in the region	2.490	1.312	6.752	<b>4 633</b>	6.358	5.226	10.116	3.026	39.913
Percentage of female candidates	16%	10%	16%	<b>27%</b>	14%	22%	12%	27%	18%

Opinions about the quota differ too (Laouali, 2005). Some see the quota as a necessary evil, because although it defines a minimum, it is often used as a maximum. They argue the law should be temporary. Even where a quota system does guarantee the presence of women, women are often not seen as political partners and their legitimacy and accountability are therefore questioned (Francis, 2005). Others value the quota more positively arguing that the 10% is only a minimum, one can opt for higher percentages. Whether in favour or against, it is in the perspective of the quota system that

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- 5 République du Niger, Autorisation l’adhésion de la République du Niger à la Convention sur l’élimination de toutes les formes de discrimination à l’égard des femmes, adoptée le 18 décembre 1979 à New York, Ordonnance 99-30, Niamey 1999
  - 6 Like article 2, paragraph d and f, which mentions the abolition of customs and practices that constitute a discrimination against women: particularly regarding succession. In the latest meeting of the national assembly in June 2006 again the reservations were voted against.
  - 7 République du Niger, Instituant le système de quota dans les fonctions électives, au Gouvernement et dans l’Administration de l’Etat, Loi no 2000-008, Niamey, le 07 juin 2000
  - 8 CONGAFEN, Bulletin d’Information et de liaison « MATAN DAGA », No 009 – Septembre 2004

political parties presented their candidates on the election list for the municipal elections.

To enhance decentralisation, the government established more municipalities in 2004.<sup>9</sup> The total number of local elected positions thus increased enormously. Candidates also could now also register within their political party at local level instead of at national level.

The municipality was divided into districts. Candidates represented their district and campaigned in their district. On election day the electorate voted for a political party, not for an individual candidate. Based on the outcome of the election per district and per party, the party decided who had won a seat.

It is within this context that women put their names forward within the political parties, stood and campaigned in the local elections and won seats.

## 2 Case study

In 2005 SNV Netherlands Development Organisation in Maradi supported five municipal councils with its advisory services aimed at strengthening the various capacities of the councils. These were the three municipal councils of Maradi<sup>10</sup> and the municipal councils of Guidan Roudji<sup>11</sup> and Madarounfa<sup>12</sup>. Although the last two mentioned have an urban status, their environment is quite rural. The research was carried out in these five municipal councils.<sup>13</sup>

An important partner in the discussions and research was the Regional Directorate of Social Development (DRDS) in Maradi, and more specifically the section of Women's Promotion.<sup>14</sup> The Directorate

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9 The number of municipalities was increased from 14 to 265 municipalities: 52 urban and 213 rural municipalities.

10 Maradi is a town in the southern region of Niger. It is an important trade centre in Niger, especially with its neighbouring country Nigeria.

11 Guidan Roudji is about 45 km from Maradi

12 Madarounfa is about 22 km from Maradi

13 SNV's interest is too to explore extension of its services to the councils focused on support to female councilors and female leaders.

14 Direction Régionale de Développement Social Maradi, Promotion des Femmes



is developing a programme on female leadership. Support to female councillors at regional level will be part of the leadership programme.<sup>15</sup> In all five municipal councils women were elected as councillors, in total fifteen women for 76 seats. Of the fifteen female councillors, fourteen participated in the research. (One person was out of town during the time of research.)

Thirteen women were interviewed individually. And nine of the fourteen women participated in the focus group discussions.

Society in Maradi is deeply gendered in the sense that roles and responsibilities are strictly divided between men and women. Beliefs and values are rooted in different traditions and in Islam. Marriages are merely regulated by traditional and religious laws, which for example regulate divorce, give the care of the children to the father in case of divorce and reinforce inequalities when it comes to heritage. Men dominate the public sphere and control productive activities, like the market. Women are responsible for the reproductive activities, most of them within the household domain. Even when women are involved in commercial activities, they operate from their homes, less visible to the “public eye”. This determines their room for manoeuvre, as will be explained in section four.

## 3 Hypotheses and research method

### 3.1 Hypothesis

The research is based on the hypothesis that *women are chosen as candidates and elected as councillors because of their engagement in informal mechanisms rather than because they meet formal criteria.*

The following questions were used to test the hypothesis:

- What is the profile of the women elected (age, marital status, children, educational background, their relationship with women’s

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15 SNV will collaborate with DRDS on the development of this programme on female leadership.

- groups and associations and their position in the political party)?
- What were the criteria for the selection of a candidate?
  - What kind of support did they receive, from whom? Which were the (strategic) alliances? How did they mobilise these alliances?

### 3.2 Field research

The field research consisted of the following elements:

- An introduction meeting for all women councillors during which the objective and rationale of the research was explained and their support requested. The director of DRDS (Regional Directorate, Social Development) explained the possibilities for future support and collaboration. Nine women were present.
- Discussions with the women individually, using a prepared interview guide (see annex 1). The purpose was to collect basic information on the profile of the women (see above) and their involvement in the political process. It was also aimed at creating a possibility for the women to vent information that would be expressed or perceived less easily in a group meeting. Thirteen women were interviewed.
- Individual discussions with a delegate from all political parties represented in the municipal councils. The discussions dealt with the election process, the selection of female candidates and the application of the quota system. All representatives were male.
- Focus group discussions with the women councillors of the five municipal councils. Discussions in smaller groups were organised around three main themes:
  - An elaboration of the political programmes, opportunities and constraints
  - Influential actors in their political life
  - Collaboration in the future with DRDS<sup>16</sup>

Sub questions on each theme guided the discussions. The main purpose of this meeting was to get a better understanding of the

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16 The prospect of collaboration with DRDS could create a bias in the discussions. Hence it was decided to include this aspect at the end of the meeting in order to create an opportunity for discussing and linking the findings of this research to the further elaboration of the leadership programme. Support to female councillors is a part of this programme.

strategies women had chosen during their campaign and to gain more information on the factors that shape the social relationships between the women and their community. Nine women participated.

All the above activities were conducted in French and Hausa. Some women only spoke Hausa and even when women did understand French, their common language of communication is Hausa. Therefore the director of DRDS and two colleagues from SNV (one woman, one man) participated in the two group meetings and facilitated the translations. Each of them collaborated in the individual interviews.

### 3.3 Limitations of the research

This research looks only at the mechanisms that influenced women's candidature and elections, as experienced and expressed by the women councillors themselves. It is not a comparative analysis with male councillors. Nor does it reflect the opinion of the electorate. Further research is needed to elaborate these areas.

Another limitation that may affect the interpretation is that the researcher did not speak Hausa and depended on the translations.

## 4 Research findings

### 4.1 The electoral process and the quota

Five political parties are represented in the municipal councils covered in this research, although their representation in the councils differs.

The local representatives from all political parties indicated that they received instructions from their party executive to adhere to the quota in the nomination of candidates on the electoral list, and to ensure that the quota was respected in the outcomes of the elections. Each party presented a number of candidates equal to the total number of seats available for the municipal council (both title holders and replacements). In order to be sure to fulfil the quota in the final election the parties applied the following system: out of 10 appointed candidates 1 or 2 candidates had to be a woman, out of 11 candidates and more, 3-4 women could be appointed.

All women mentioned they had to argue firmly within their party to go beyond the required quota and to put more women on the list of candidates. They also had to make a strong case about the names of the candidates. However, there was no doubt about their candidature. Only one woman referred to an incident. "The party had promised to put my name on the election list. So I thought they had done it. I have a friend who went to Maradi to read the list, because I cannot do that myself. And she told me my name was not there. With other women of the village we went to the party, and after that they put my name on the list."

Both at the level of each political party and at the level of each municipality the quota requirement of a minimum of 10% for "either sex" was respected (see table 1). But the representation of women in the five municipal councils differs substantially as table 1 shows: in Guidan Rounjdji the representation of women is just above 10%, while Maradi Commune II counts 29% women councillors, far more than the required 10%.

*Table 2: number and percentage of elected female councillors in relation with the total number of councillors per political party and per municipal council.*

Political party Municipality	RDP <sup>17</sup> Jama'a	MNSD Nassara	RSD Gaskiya	PNDS Tarayya	CDS – Rahama	Total number
	T/W	T/W	T/W	T/W	T/W	T/W
Maradi Commune I	1/-	4/1	5/2	4/1	2/-	16/4 25%
Maradi Commune II	2/1	5/1	4/1	2/1	1/-	14/4 29%
Maradi Commune III	---	5/1	5/1	3/1	1/-	14/3 21%
Guidan Rounjdji	---	8/1	2/-	5/1	2/-	17/2 12%
Madarounfa	2/ -	4/1	2/-	2/-	5/1	15/2 13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5/1 20%</b>	<b>26/5 9%</b>	<b>18/4 22%</b>	<b>16/4 25%</b>	<b>11/1 9%</b>	<b>76/15 20%</b>

T = total number of councillors; W = number of women councillors

17 Often one refers to the political party by the local name. RDP Jama'a is the "Rassemblement Démocratique et Populaire" People; MNSD Nassara « Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement » Victory ; RSD Gaskiya : « Rassemblement Social Démocratique » Truth ; PNDS Tarayya : « Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme » Unity ; and CDS Rahama : « Convention Démocratique et Sociale » Achievement

In Commune III Maradi two women from RSD Gaskiya were elected, which brought the total to 5 women councillors within the political party (28%) and 4 women councillors in Commune III (29%). One of the women was a candidate for the post of mayor of the council. However, she was appointed as a minister at national level. Her replacement was a man, so he took over her responsibilities as councillor. In this way the party 'lost' one woman seat in Commune III.

Each municipality had various districts. Each political party appointed one or two men and if possible one woman as candidates per district where the party was active. Two male candidates and no female candidate was possible, according to a representative of a political party, but only two female candidates not. For him politics was still a male dominated affair where women could have access, but not dominate. Each candidate campaigned formally in the district where she/he lived or was appointed to. In the focus group discussions the women mentioned that they also would go to their parents and family when they lived in another district and asked them to support the party. It would count positively for her as a candidate when in addition the party would gain many votes in the district of her parents.

In case more persons were campaigning for the same party in the same district and not everybody would win a seat, one did not officially know who got the votes since one voted for the party. The selection was based on the impression the party had of your campaign, on your ability to bring people to the polling stations. It is clear that this procedure caused many discussions and sometimes created doubt about the legitimacy of the selected winners. One party mentioned a problem in the nomination of councillors. Both the female and the male candidate had campaigned fiercely. Looking at the results in the other districts, the party decided to choose the female candidate in order to adhere to the quota.

It is because of the above-mentioned process that women claimed to have won the elections on their own merit and not because of the quota. All parties confirmed that the women were very active in campaigning and gained votes for the party. They not only campaigned in their own districts, but also in other districts via their parents, family members and friends.

The results in the three municipal councils in Maradi strongly support this claim made by the women. The representation of women in these three councils is 25%. This result goes against the argument that women are only elected because of the quota. It confirms that local elections do offer opportunities to women and that they do know how to exploit these opportunities.

## 4.2 Profile of the elected women and their relationship with their social and political environment

### **Age, marital status and children**

The vast majority of the population of the Maradi region is Muslim. Polygamy is widely practised. According to all the interviews and focus group discussions being married is considered an important factor for women. Divorce occurs quite frequently and women might remarry after a divorce. From the individual interviews it turned out that of the thirteen women interviewed, twelve women live or had lived (being divorced or widowed) in a polygamous marriage. Seven women are married, three divorced and three widowed. Eleven women, or 85%, are 40 years or older.

Having children is important for being accepted and appreciated as a woman. All women, except one, had children. The number of children ranged from one child up to eight children (alive). The woman without children had taken the responsibility of raising children of her brother. One woman had only small children; all the others had children above fifteen years old, of whom three also had one smaller child under twelve.

These data suggest the importance of age, marital status and having children. For a young, single woman without children it would be more difficult to enter politics publicly. "No, when a woman has no husband, you cannot ask her to be a candidate" (quote from one representative of a political party). In the focus group discussions, the women present did not accept this statement. They confirmed it would not be easy, but stressed the importance of self-confidence and the woman's own conviction that she could stand as a candidate.

Besides the fact that having elder, often married, children enables women to be involved in politics and to have time for campaigning, elder children are also an important source of moral and financial support.

The above indicates that women continuously searched for space to manoeuvre within the existing power-relations and would define norms and values differently, while at the same time being strategic so as not to be rejected by either party or society. Acceptance by the political party and electorate was important in terms of making it possible for women to stand as candidates for local elections.

### Education

To what extent is formal education or religious education significant for the selection of women as candidates? Female adult literacy rate, age fifteen and above, is 9.4% in Niger (UNDP, Human Development Report 2005). Both women and representatives of the political parties indicated that education is an important issue for the future, but not directly for the selection of candidates.

Of the 7 women who had received formal education, one woman finished the seventh primary grade, five women finished secondary education followed by a teacher's degree, and one woman had a university degree. Six women visited the Koran school. Two women can read the Koran; the others can recite some 'suras'. Taking the five municipal councils together, formal education and religious education do not seem to be a decisive factor in the selection of women as candidates in the municipal elections (table 2)

*Table 3: age group, formal and religious education of women*

Age group	36-40		41-45		46-50		56-60		60 +		Total	
Number of women	2		2		5		3		1		13	
Formal Education	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Number of women	2	-	1	1	3	2	1	2	-	1	7	6
Koran school (reciting)	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Number of women	2	-	1	1	2	3	1	2	-	1	6	7

There are differences in formal education between Maradi, an urban environment on the one hand and, on the other, Guidan Roundji and Madarounfa, which are more rural. The four candidates in Guidan Roundji and Madarounfa have not received any formal education. However in Maradi, of the nine women interviewed, seven women (78%) have achieved secondary or higher education. This becomes more striking when taking into account the female literacy rate of 9.4% in Niger.

One possible conclusion is that in an urban context education is an important factor that has facilitated women's access and ascendancy in the social and political arena.

### **Political involvement**

A factor that bound all women was their active involvement in politics at local level. Eleven women mentioned they have been politically involved since the 1991 conference, which paved the way for a multi party system. Two women followed the political developments from a distance and got more involved three of four years ago. At the time of the elections, all women were president of the women's section of their political party in their neighbourhood or village. In addition one councillor was also the president of various women's sections: of the town district, of Commune I, of the Maradi Regional political wing and she was an advisor to the national political bureau on women's affairs. Only one woman occupied a post not directly related to women's affairs: she was secretary of the propaganda and information section of her political party in Maradi. She stressed the importance for women to be more widely involved if they want to have more influence on the political agenda of the political party.

To stand for elections, it is important first to acquire a formal position within the political party. In this case, women obtained formal positions in at least each party's women's wing.

### **Relationship with the family.**

Eleven of the thirteen women came from a family with a political history. One woman for example mentioned that her grandfather was a member of the national assembly. Five women have family members also elected as councillors, but in other municipalities. Interesting to note is that in one family one could find members of different political parties. This was no problem until two members of the same family stood for election in the same district of the town. The decision of the elders (often male) in the family was then decisive, as one woman explained. "My brother and I both wanted to stand for election, my brother for another party. This created a conflict in the family. So I called my uncles and informed them that I wanted to withdraw. I wanted to have the family in peace. My uncles didn't agree and told me to go ahead and they were going to support me. And that's how I started my campaign". The uncles were members of the same political party as the woman.



Coming from a family with a political history seemed to be a positive feature. The candidate knew the history of the party and the persons involved, from her own family and others.

Looking at the occupation of the husband in those cases where women were married, all husbands were involved in business, three were retired teachers. These networks also helped to support their partner's candidature and campaign.

Where women stressed the support of husband, parents and family members, the representatives of the political parties insisted that the candidate had to be a "good woman". This meant, according to the representatives, that the party would look at how the community considered the way the woman ran her household, her relationship with her husband, children and parents.

Not everybody agreed that a woman could stand for elections: women were blamed for damaging the image of the family or their husbands accused of letting their wives run the show. As one woman mentioned: "a woman who enters politics is seen as a bad eye, shameless, a prostitute when she is not married, and one who does not respect her husband". The support of husband, elder children and family was important in order to cope with these criticisms - although this support was not always benign. One woman said: "My husband wanted me to stop with being a candidate. He was tired of the negative remarks people were making. When I refused he threatened to divorce me. I told him to go ahead; he knew I was active in politics when he married me. Then he was silent". The other women councillors recognised cases like this and indicated that it was not always easy to stand as a candidate and to deal with the various forms of criticisms.

### **Social relationships**

The women were well known in their communities. All women were member of a local saving and credit group (tontine), often the president. It showed that in general terms they were trusted. Asked why they thought people and more specifically women would vote for them, the answer was unanimous: "because they trust me, they know I can do something for them". Six women were also member of other organisations, be it of a women's federation, trade union for female

teachers, a women's business group or a cultural association, where one was a spiritual mediator.

*Table 4: participation of women in organisations*

Type of organisation	Nr of women
Saving and credit group In their town area/village	13
National NGO, local department	2
Women business group	1
Trade Union	2
Cultural association	1

Social relations were interwoven with other activities. All women were involved in business activities, ranging from keeping and trading small animals and selling milk products, to making beignets (doughnuts), to buying and selling materials (like cloth) and jewellery. One woman was a registered entrepreneur.<sup>18</sup> What characterised women's business activities was that they were informal and thus invisible. All women traded from their homes, whenever they had time, whenever there was a demand. It was an ongoing responsibility that partly shaped their relationship with their environment. Another channel was the connections at schools, both with colleagues and students, for those women candidates who were teachers. All these connections formed part of their alliance and network strategy during their campaign.

The way the women campaigned was interesting. Because the home is strictly the domain of the women, female candidates could enter the private sphere of the homes, whereas male candidates dominated the public sphere like the market and the mosque – an area more difficult to enter for female candidates, especially in the evening. So the female candidates would join meetings and gatherings during the day and in the evenings they would go from door to door to discuss politics and their candidacy with the women and with the husband and other male members in case they were home. The result of these contacts would be seen on the day of the election.

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18 There are two women entrepreneurs officially registered at the Chamber of Industry in the Maradi region.

Religion was formally not a criterion, but the way a woman fulfilled her responsibilities in traditional ceremonies and related to her religion did count. "It is important to know where someone prays," mentioned the representatives of the political parties, meaning that a woman should respect the relationship between the family and the marabout. The woman also invested in this relationship during her campaign.

The picture that emerged showed that the elected female councillors' social relationships were deeply interwoven with different associations and organisations and within a business environment. The women used all these channels during their campaign. The way women campaigned fitted the gender divisions that defined the different roles and responsibilities and therefore often the space one could use.

### **Financial means**

Women complained that campaigning had become a commercial issue, not only during the campaign, but also on election day when cars were rented to bring part of the electorate to the polling stations. For example women would rent cars to collect the wives of their marabout and the religious leaders in their district.

Also in this case, in order to maintain the mutual relationships and gain the votes, the system of reciprocity had to be respected. And this also counted for the women. "No financial means, no candidate" as one woman summarised this issue. "Going from door to door also meant giving some sugar, a piece of soap or bigger presents in return for a vote".

Women would use their share of the credit and saving group, and the income of their business for financing their campaign. Family relations were not only important for moral support and acceptance by the external environment, but also to support the candidate financially. Children, husband, parents, friends, all contributed to the success. All women mentioned that the financial support by the political party was limited.

## 5 Conclusion

Formal factors are important for the purpose of qualifying as a candidate. Women adhered to the formal criteria as directed by the electoral code.

The representation of women councillors in the five municipal councils confirms the fact that within the decentralisation process women have better access to local politics, in this case municipal councils.

The quota is indeed an enabling minimum, a stepping stone for women who want to enter politics. In this case the quota system is not just tokenism and women are taken seriously in the municipal council elections.

The research shows the prevalence and importance of the various informal mechanisms like a family profile of being married, having children and having the support their husband, parents, elder children and other family members.

But women also develop different strategies within the space that is male dominated. They stress that self-confidence and trust in one's own capacity are very important in order to pursue a political career, and that you can stand as a candidate when you are young, not married or without children.

Formal education is mentioned as not essential, but the research shows its relevance, especially in urban areas like Maradi.

Political involvement and a family history in politics are important. All women occupied positions in their political party and within their communities. However, most positions are related to women's affairs. This confirms Mukhopadhyay and Meer's (2004) observation that political office continues to be the preserve of men, where women are seen as able to take responsibilities for women's affairs, but less entitled to take other functions and responsibilities. This is not to say that women's affairs are of less importance, but it makes visible how patriarchal dominance reinforces existing gender divisions in society and therefore also in politics.

The women elected are considered as leaders, trusted and known by the community. Their social relationships and their use of the various

networks enhance their acceptance by the community and the political parties. And they exploit these networks in different ways, depending on the situation.

Women also use the space given to them as defined by existing gender divisions. It is in this domain of combining the exploitation of network relations with individual contacts in the homes that women played a distinctive role. It brought votes to the party that are normally difficult to access by men. All political parties acknowledged the important role women had played in the campaign.

Financial resources are another relevant informal mechanism. Asking for a vote also requires giving something: electoral support is often "bought". And here, financial support of family and friends becomes pertinent.

This research confirms the lack of distinction between public and personal spheres, as mentioned by Chabal and Daloz (1999). The relations women have with their wider community, based on personalized bonds of reciprocity, are essential cornerstones of their campaigning and ultimately political success.

But the research also illustrates the ambivalence in the positions of the women. They have to balance meeting the expectations of the political party and the expectations of the supporters who voted for them. When the women councillors want to put women's interests on the political agenda and also create space to pursue their political career, they have to face up to the existing power relations in their communities, where patriarchal norms dominate the public and political scene.

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