Situating Political Engagement in Their Life Courses and Class Positionalities: Women in Politics in the Republic of Benin

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Women's decisions to engage in politics (or not) need to be understood in relation to their other tasks, roles, responsibilities, and expectations, contextualized in the temporalities of women´s life courses and the ways those life courses are linked to the life courses of others.

Situating Political Engagement in Their Life Courses and Class Positionalities: Women in Politics in the Republic of Benin[1]

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Taking an anthropological perspective of the life course, this article contributes to debates on why women´s engagement in politics is so low in West Africa, with special attention to the Republic of Benin. It argues that women's political engagement must be understood as deeply entangled with their multiple relations, especially their positioning in roles related to gender and the life course. Given that they must balance their engagement with husbands, children, parents, friends, and siblings through different life stages, their willingness to enter politics may change over time. As they experience and describe politics as a dirty and dangerous space, they often seek to protect themselves and their kin. At the same time, their presence in politics confirms deepening inequalities and class-building processes.

Introduction

Marianne, one of twenty-four women who had just been elected to the parliament of the Republic of Benin on a new "women's list," was busy when I contacted her on a Sunday afternoon in April 2023 and asked to meet to discuss women's roles in politics. We were both in Kandi,[2] a city in northern Benin, where she lived with her family, but she had to leave for the capital early the next morning and said we would have to do the interview the same day. Unfortunately, I had time only in the evening, and it was Ramadan.

Many members of her household were Muslim, and she would be busy until eight, preparing and serving the iftar meal; however, she herself was Christian and would be free afterward. She said I should not come to her home, as my presence might disturb the prayers, but she could not easily come to meet me at the hotel. In Kandi, everybody knew everybody else,

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and rumors that a new female member of parliament had visited a hotel alone—perhaps to meet a man secretly—could damage her career.

She thought for a bit, and then asked if I could wait until even later in the evening, when a relative of her husband could accompany her to the hotel after the Ramadan prayers. I agreed. Finally, she arrived at the hotel around ten with her husband's nephew, who, during our conversation, waited outside in her car. We had a long and open talk as we relaxed over drinks in the hotel's garden. Finally, she left with him around midnight.

This vignette demonstrates how Marianne presents her negotiation of multiple and gendered roles and role expectations that she faces as a woman in politics. Respecting her husband´s religion and preparing the required meals, she acts as a wife and a household manager in a multireligious family, ensuring the appropriate atmosphere during the time of prayers, which some household members practice. Here, she balances the needs of Christians and Muslims. In addition to her roles related to the household, religion, and networks of kin, she holds a public role as a woman leader, which requires giving interviews to people like me. Here, she fulfills role expectations of being an impeccably moral woman without giving people the chance to attribute affairs to her, and she must work around constraints of traveling to the capital for her political work. At the same time, she wants to make herself visible and to participate in networking, so she does not want to miss the chance of meeting a German professor interested in women and politics. In fact, I was surprised by the outcome of these negotiations: sitting up late with her in a hotel garden because she had made time for a conversation with me on short notice was much more attention than I had expected.

When I met Marianne in April 2023, she was in her sixties, but still a newcomer to politics. As a teacher's daughter, she had been well educated, and she and her four sisters were all professionals with visibility in Beninese society: a university professor, a consultant in an international organization, and a businesswoman. All were married women in well-situated middle-class households in Benin. She was not the first of her family to occupy a political position; two other sisters had some experience in politics, though only for a short time. It is exactly the socioeconomic background of educational elites or middle classes from which most women in politics in Benin come.

Marianne´s rise to become a member of parliament was due to a new law, which reserves a certain number of places in parliament exclusively for women. As she understood her role as a politician, she needed to protect her reputation against a public that she and many other women in politics portray as critical. To protect herself, she behaved as a good wife who would not go to a hotel alone and would meet expectations to be a good household manager and a good politician, always aware that shame might be attributed to a woman in politics for a range of perceived shortcomings or infractions wider than that of a man.

In addition, Marianne explained to me that her willingness to start a political career fit well in the current phase of her life. Having retired

recently, with her children grown up, she had sufficient time to start a political career, for which she felt free enough from tiring family responsibilities, as well as from professional work. As her husband, a former banker, was retired, he had the time and the financial resources to provide essential support for her election campaign.[3] Meanwhile, she still felt young and vigorous enough to face the new challenge; however, she was persuaded that her political career would benefit her family too. Many factors came together to make this an opportune moment: as she presented her role as a politician to me it seemed to connect almost perfectly with her other roles and responsibilities, and to this specific moment in her life. She pointed out that some years before, she would not even have imagined engaging in politics.

The issues raised in my conversation with Marianne, and more specifically that she presented her engagement in politics as a perfect fit to her gender, familial, professional, and life-course–related roles, lead to my central argument: to comprehend why so few women in Benin enter politics, women's decisions to engage in politics (or not) need to be understood in relation to their other tasks, roles, responsibilities, and expectations, which are not fixed and static, but are undergoing general changes across Benin. Even more importantly for the present argument, they are contextualized in the temporalities of women´s life courses and the ways those life courses are linked to the life courses of others.

A life-course perspective embeds the demands and expectations of political life in different phases of women´s life trajectories and acknowledges the temporal dimension of decisions as vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks 2002), made in specific moments but always changing over time.

Marianne´s decision to enter politics after retirement confirms the embeddedness of her personal decision in various relations and a specific temporality shaped by woman-specific social roles: when the intensity of responsibilities for children decreases and household pressures shrink, new relations—for instance, those created by political roles—become easier. Women's decisions to enter politics can be understood as being embedded in three dimensions of relationality: entanglements of their relations and role expectations with others' life courses, entanglements between gendered norms and role expectations and larger societal change, and processes of change over their life course. These dimensions are clear in Marianne's claim that politics might open new possibilities for her relations in the web of kinship. At the same time, when she talks about the risks she faces—as, for instance, losing her good reputation, not having enough time for smaller children, or not meeting her husband´s expectations—she links her actions as a politician with her life outside politics.

When Marianne mentions her economic well-being as a precondition for her political career, she hints at the importance of women´s socioeconomic positionality in being able to "do politics." In Benin, I understand women´s political careers as part of an ongoing process of class building and of "doing class" (West and Fenstermaker 1995). In contrast to men engaged in politics in Benin, women share an educated, middle-class

background,[4] and acting as politicians stabilizes their class positionality. Here again, I see entanglements with others' life courses as important: being embedded in a better-off household, which enables a good education, and having the support of family members (as with many women in politics in Benin), can be understood as an expression of a middle-class lifestyle.

An Anthropological Focus on Three Dimensions of Relatedness in the Life Course

In the "burgeoning but not very well known literature on women in African parliaments" (Bauer 2012, 371),[5] recognition of patriarchal political cultures and the gatekeeping functions of political parties demonstrate that quotas have helped, and might still help, increase women's presence in parliaments. Political scientists connect women´s absence or presence in politics to gender norms and more specifically, to women´s other obligations and life-course–related norms. For instance, in the United States, quantitative data show that household compositions and household tasks are key to understanding which women are likeliest to enter into politics (Bernhard et al. 2021). It is not women's economic situatedness in absolute terms that determine their ability and willingness or refusal to enter in politics, but more specifically the political economy of their households.

Specific temporalities over the life course were central in my conversations with women in Benin. Marianne is a good example of somebody who, as she claimed herself, never thought she might enter politics; but at a specific moment, given new possibilities through a new quota law and her connections with others, she did.

Taking a life-course perspective, I am inspired by the idea of the linking of lives (Elder 1994) and the idea of vital conjunctures (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2005), which assume fluid and changing life-course trajectories, rejecting the notion of static life phases. By combining these arguments, I understand life trajectories as "interdependent vital conjunctures" (Alber 2023, 284), acknowledging that every specific life trajectory is made and shaped by those of others, while making and shaping others. Marianne, for instance, decides not only for herself: attending to her good reputation and that of her marriage, she shapes her husband´s reputation, and by asking his nephew to accompany her in the car, her decision to enter politics might change his trajectory too.

I thus contribute to the anthropological literature on women in Africa that remains largely focused on poorer strata (Stepper 2020). Studying women in politics offers an opportunity to redress the focus on poorer women (for example, Denzer [1992]), and it contributes to the anthropological literature on African elites, which has a strong bias toward males (Behrends and Pauli 2012).

The Gendered Political Landscape in Benin

Since the colonial era, the political sphere in Benin has, as in many other West African countries, largely been dominated by men. The situation before the invasion of the French seems unclear, with some authors arguing that women then had a stronger position (Reuther 2019). One of the reasons mentioned is that male French colonial officers and mainly male Christian missionaries promoted the idea of women as monogamous housewives (see Allmann and Tashjian 2000 on Ghana). In fact, the subordination of women to male dominance throughout Africa may have reinforced patriarchal power. In any case, French colonial administration included male chiefs in the state administration but did not offer any position to women. Immediately after 1960, when the Republic of Dahomey (as it was then called) achieved independence, not a single woman was in any formal political body—local, regional, or national.[6]

One of the most discussed and represented group of women who occupied a strong position were the so-called Amazons of the Kingdom of Dahomey, a well-documented female army helping the King of Dahomey in raising slaves and fighting neighboring forces. They are largely represented in popular historiography, media, monuments, and movies and seem, since the nineteenth century, to be an object of European male exoticizing imaginations (Reuther 2019). In 2022, an enormous monument of an Amazon was built on the beach promenade in Cotonou next to the president's official residence. It is one of many signs that the Amazons have become a national symbol for women´s power and resistance.

Besides the Amazons, the position of women has varied from place to place. In a book manuscript of the history of girlhood in precolonial Dahomey, Jessica Reuther (2025) demonstrates how the economic capacity of a strong woman trader had first increased with the help of the King of Dahomey and then was destroyed (see Reuther, this issue). A major resource of power for women has seemingly been the markets and possibilities of trading.

After the Marxist-Leninist revolution of 1974, women organized politically by establishing the Organisation des Femmes Révolutionnaires du Bénin (Attanasso 2012; Reuther 2019, 9). Some exceptional women held political offices during that time, with the first woman cabinet minister, Karimou Rafiatou, appointed in 1989, when the Marxist-Leninist period ended.[7]

Only after the democratic renewal in 1990 (Allen 1992; Banégas 2002, 2014) did women slowly begin to reclaim an active role in political life; however, female politicians remained an exception. The most prominent politician was probably Marie-Elise Gbedo, the first female presidential candidate in West Africa, who competed in four elections but never received more than 1 percent of the vote.[8] In April 2023, she told me that one of her main motivations to become a candidate had been to

demonstrate to society that a woman could be president, despite widespread prejudice that claimed it was legally impossible; however, the degree of hostility to her candidacy demonstrated how far the country was—and still is—from electing a woman as president. And still, when I undertook the research for this article, many referred to her as an outstanding example of women in politics, despite their remarkably diverse opinions. Several women told me she was one of their role models, but numerous negative comments, especially from male research partners, recalled her "exaggerated feminism," as one of my research partners called it. This degree of ambivalence underlines that even today, women are not self-evidently accepted in politics in Benin.

Even after the turn of the millennium, the number and presence of women acting as mayors, members of parliament, and cabinet ministers remained extremely low. In 2023, Benin was ranked 109th of 188 countries for female participation in politics; only four of twenty-three current cabinet ministers are women, though this is the highest number in the country's history. The situation in local politics is worse: following the May 2020 municipality elections, the 1,815 municipal councillors included only seventy women, 3.9 percent of the total. One year before, at the parliamentary elections, only eight (7.3 percent) women were elected to become part of the 109 members of parliament. Finally, only three women were among the twenty-three cabinet ministers at that time.[9]

Even if the numbers are still low, a small but important step was taken with the 2019 election law, which reserved twenty-four seats for women in the parliament. This was part of an electoral reform intended to reorganize the political-party system by reducing the number of parties. By requiring every party to nominate candidates for every seat in every district, it aimed to reduce the dominance of regional political parties centred on a single personality (Tama 2022). Each party must nominate one woman in each electoral district to the new "women's bonus list." In each district, the woman candidate of the party that wins the most votes is elected.[10] With that, Benin followed a "fast track" (Dahlerup and Friedenvall 2005) to more gender equity in parliament (see Bauer 2012 about the positive effect of quotas).

The promulgation of this law was facilitated by the fact that the women's seats were additional seats and thus did not directly threaten men in power. Meanwhile, people expressed their doubts about and opposition to the law based mainly on prejudices that it would be difficult to find qualified female candidates and that social change should come before requiring people to vote for women candidates.[11] As the first election under the new law took place in 2023 and the parliament had only just been seated when I did my empirical research, it remains to be seen if and how the new presence of women in the parliament will change the political landscape.

Methodological Outline and Positionality

I found inspiration for this article in "Women in Politics in West Africa," an Interdisciplinary Fellow Group (IFG) at the Maria Sibylla Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), where women's positions in politics in West Africa and reasons for their underrepresentation in political institutions were being discussed. The interdisciplinary exchanges made me aware that anthropologists interested in the life course might contribute with a perspective on these questions by adding to the scholarship, shaped mainly by political science. Questions of life expectations, aspirations, and gendered positionalities in class formation over the life course are fields of anthropological enquiry. Such anthropological approaches to middle-class women in West Africa (Behrends and Lentz, 2012; Behrends and Pauli 2012) have contributed to the understanding of education as key for middle classes—however, not specifically with regard to women in politics.

I developed a life-course perspective on middle-class families in the frame of "Middle Classes on the Rise," a research project in which I demonstrated the heterogeneity of middle-class households (Alber 2019).[12] Here, I conducted intensive work, including interviews and participant-observation in middle-class households of highly educated families, mostly from northern Benin, in Cotonou and Parakou, in 2016 and 2017. At that time, I met several of the people cited in this article, with whom I have maintained contact until now. As an anthropologist dedicated to the methodological approach of following peoples´ life courses over time, I add a temporal dimension to George Marcus's multisited approach (1995) of "following the people" by accompanying people over time, if possible, in their own spaces. Multisite approaches have been further developed for the sphere of a national parliament by Stefan Laube and Jan Schank (2023), though not, as here presented, with the dimension of time.

I undertook the multisite and multi-time approach by taking up these existing contacts to women in (mainly upper) middle-class families and visiting them again in March and April 2023, for more focused interviews about their roles in politics. The interviews—conducted in public places, their working spaces, and often at home—were undertaken in the cities of Abomey, Cotonou, Kandi, Parakou, and Porto-Novo. From my many contacts, I selected thirteen women active in politics or living in politicians' households, or who had been asked to become active in politics but had refused. During these months, I had several meetings with each of the respondents, in different places if possible. I conducted one in-depth biographical interview with each, in which we reconstructed their life trajectories and specific relations with politics and intensively discussed their role in politics or their argument to reject entering it. As I had known the women before, I could participate in some private and family-related events, including some *iftar* meals, as we were in Ramadan.

I combined this women-focused approach with interviews and discussions with some men, with whom I discussed women´s underrepresentation in politics and their perspectives on the changes with the new law.

Among the women, six had been or still were intensively engaged in politics, including current and former members of parliament, parliamentary candidates who had been defeated in 2023 but remained active in their political parties, a mayor, a former cabinet minister, and a former presidential candidate. The seven women not currently engaged in politics were selected because all are connected to politics, either though kinship ties, as with a wife and a daughter of male cabinet ministers, or they had declined a political appointment or nomination or were reflecting on a future career in politics. Two were engaged in women's associations or education and had decided against engaging in politics. All thirteen had clear, strong, well-informed opinions about the political arena. Christian and Muslim women were almost equally represented in my sample.

The four men I interviewed more deeply were all active in politics but in different arenas. The local level of political organization was represented by Tamou, the former mayor of a tiny and remote village. At the other extreme was Abdallah, a former cabinet minister and presidential candidate. The other two fell in-between. This selection provided voices from different positions in Benin society.

As a German researcher and anthropologist having worked for a long period in Benin, I am seen as a woman outsider, to whom is attributed some trust, as the majority of my research partners have known me for some time. As a professor who has published largely on Benin, I am seen as a public person with whom contact might be useful for persons in politics. I experienced this as facilitating new contacts and women's willingness to share their experiences with me. In general, having some experiences of women´s trajectories through male domains on my own, parts of the discussions with my research partners included reflections about women´s roles in general and the challenges and difficulties of (upper) middle-class women (as I would position myself) who are more highly educated than their mothers and seek to enter social domains, including parliaments and university posts, that were reserved for men in the generation before.

Education, Class Positionality, and Support from Family Members

Women active in politics in Benin, despite all the differences among them, are more homogeneous than men. Men's educational profile and to a certain degree their economic positionality in society is diverse and mirrors the societal diversity, but I did not find any woman active in politics in Benin who did not belong to the middle or upper class. One aspect of this positionality is that all woman active in politics in Benin have a good education and fluently speak French, the national language. No woman said she was the first girl of

her family to be at school—which, in general in Benin, is still often the case. All women I spoke to had finished university and worked as professionals before entering politics.

This is not true of their male colleagues. Even today, some male members of parliament and municipal councillors lack a high-school degree or come from a lower-class background. Many local or district politicians in Benin have attended school for only a few years, and some have no degree at all. Though a trend toward higher educational levels can be observed among people engaged in politics, especially at the level of villages and districts, some village heads, like Tamou, do not speak French and did not attend school. Tamou has acted as a village mayor for more than sixteen years, but he confirms that all the women he knows who act at the district or municipal level as politicians have a university degree.

Every woman in politics I met has at least a father (and sometimes a mother) who attended school. Many parents of women in politics worked in the national administration as teachers, nurses, or police officers. Many women in politics say their fathers supported their political careers. Marianne, for instance, mentioned that her father, a teacher, had encouraged her to become class representative or otherwise take up responsibilities in school. Becoming a politician seems to be one possibility for women, not only to succeed in a public function, but to confirm their belonging to the well-educated middle class and thus "doing class" in a field of activity that for women is homogeneous, marked by specific class behavior.

I would therefore see women´s engagement in politics as embedded in processes of class building in Benin, where, as elsewhere in Africa, education plays a major role (Behrends and Lentz 2012; Lentz 2020; Neubert 2019). In these processes, in which class homogeneity is produced in the case of women in politics, the transformations of families do not lead to class-homogeneous households: rather, in Benin (Alber 2019), as in other countries (Lentz 2020, 452), households are often characterized by heterogeneous positionalities—which means that some household members are more highly positioned than others, and even family members with limited education are cohabiting with others who achieved high degrees.[13]

In this context, in which even in well-situated middle-class households not everybody has a high level of schooling, the homogeneity of the educational level of female politicians is even more remarkable. Coming from well-educated middle-class backgrounds and succeeding better than other women from the same backgrounds seems to help start a career in politics. At the same time, female leadership as an expression of well-situatedness can be understood as a mark of social stratification. As many women describe, entering into politics is often connected with spending money, for instance for election campaigns. This is obviously easier for women who can mobilize economic resources.

Another factor that seems to help women enter and succeed in politics, at least if one trusts the representations of the women themselves, is being supported by male family members active in politics. Many women I spoke

with mentioned that their fathers or other male family members had been active in politics. They all stressed the importance of support from family members, but while all declared that men had encouraged or supported them, several reported that their mothers had opposed their political careers. Isabel, for instance, mentioned that whereas her mother had opposed her political career, her father-in-law, a high-level politician, had helped her gain acceptance for needing family help with childcare and a lifestyle that required travel and evening meetings. She explained that it was especially important to get support from the family of her in-laws. In any case, the fact that almost every woman with whom I talked mentioned supporters in their families demonstrates how deeply political careers of women are related to their relations with their kinfolk.

It is remarkable how often the women I talked to mentioned that members of their parents' generation had been active in politics, as either role models or supporters. Though these references could be interpreted as a way of justifying their own trajectories, it seems to me that some background in, or experiences with, politics in the family creates a certain openness to women's entering politics. No evidence for a wide emergence of mixed-gender political dynasties of politicians in Benin exists (Tamale 1999, 150), but it seems easier for women to justify their political engagement if they can relate it to that of male role models in their families; however, in some cases, political mixed-gender dynasties might appear, as, for instance, with the Soglo family, in which several male members acted, or still act, as politicians: Rosine Soglo, after 1990, when her husband, Nicephore Soglo, had become President of Benin (he being the son of Edmond Soglo, who had acted as the country´s president in 1967), entered the political sphere by founding a political party and then holding several positions, including serving as a member of parliament from 1999 to 2019.[14]

Thus, one pathway for women to enter politics in Benin is to draw on existing relations with male role models having acted or acting as politicians in the kin group. Another pathway seems to be the encouragement and support of daughters by fathers who are not necessarily active in politics but imagine public roles for them. Some women, including Marietou and Sakinatou, said their fathers had taught them to accept responsibility and speak in public. Some told me that they had started out as class representatives in school with the encouragement of fathers working as teachers, policemen, or soldiers. Representing one´s pathway into politics as having been influenced by, or resulting from, such kinship relations, and claiming that those role models had been affected by their daughters' or nieces' success in politics, demonstrates the relatedness of life trajectories and their mutual entanglements.

Many—indeed, most—women in politics in Benin with whom I spoke have a professional background in law. Such women include more lawyers than in any other profession or discipline. I see two reasons for this: first, for a long time, law and medicine have been the preferred career paths and expected professions for educated women from a middle- or upper-class

background; second, the discipline of law prepares for a position that requires public speaking, less so in medicine.

Another reason of the high number of women active in politics who studied law might be that political science is still a new discipline in the national universities—which means that women interested in politics often studied law. Clemence, for instance, told me that young women interested in politics and public affairs often choose the École Nationale d´Administration at the University of Abomey-Calavi, the elite institute for the national administration, where students can enroll in several programs of law and administration.

In sum, women highly motivated to engage in politics are mostly middle or upper class with excellent educations, often in law, public administration, or related disciplines. Many have grown up in families with male politicians or other men who have served as mentors or advocates. These features, especially high educational attainment, make female politicians a much more homogeneous group than male ones.

Female Role Expectations

As the opening vignette shows, appropriate behavior is an important theme for women in politics. Every woman told me how rumors about feminine behavior—childrearing, clothing, and above all being a good wife—constantly accompanied her political engagement. Each had been challenged by exposure to a judgemental public and a sensationalist press. Their responses to these challenges varied according to age, experience, and self-positioning.

One widespread stereotype is that women politicians are unmarried or divorced, or in any case unable to meet expectations of the qualities that make a good woman. Because marrying and having children are seen in Benin as the most important step toward becoming an adult, accusing a woman of having failed at this, whether in public or through gossip, is a highly effective way to attack her. Almost every woman I spoke with had heard about such attacks or experienced them personally. This makes marriage rumors and suspicions about behaving like a good wife one of the biggest issues for women in politics. Similarly, women politicians' negotiations with their husbands is their greatest challenge (Stepper 2020).

One strategy to deal with these issues is adhering to expectations as closely as possible. This was Marianne's path. Other solutions are possible, too. When I told Sakinatou, a member of Kandi's city council, that one of her female colleagues had not wanted to meet with me at a hotel in the evening, she laughed. "People have to get used [to the idea] that hotels are not only places for affairs, but workplaces. and everybody knows that Bio Tchane[15] always stays in your hotel when he is in Kandi. Naturally, everybody seeks to meet him there." Sakinatou´s strategy for defending herself is to keep her personal life as private as possible. She thus seeks to prevent information about her relatedness from becoming public knowledge; but she argues that

women must teach their society that it is normal for a woman to occupy a public role. Unlike Marianne, she is a single mother who raised five children. She is much younger than Marianne and considers it important for society to change its expectations and understand that women—including single mothers—can raise children successfully while engaging in politics.

Marianne, in contrast, has tried to highlight her lifestyle, which is oriented toward more conventional values of being a good wife and mother—including being chaperoned by an in-law when attending professional meetings. At the same time, she points out that being an older retired woman with adult children makes acting as a politician easier. In light of her adherence to conventional gender norms, it is interesting that Marianne agrees with Sakinatou that changing gender norms and women's image is an important reason to engage in politics. Indeed, every woman involved in politics I spoke with mentioned that wanting to improve women's social position had been an important motivation for her; in contrast, not one man mentioned gender to me as a motivation for engaging in politics.

All women with whom I talked appreciated the challenge of balancing familial obligations and responsibilities of mothering and being a wife with the requirements of politics. Marie-Elise Gbedo downplayed this task more than other women, but she claimed that, at her age, she was no longer responsible for children. Other women argued that to balance different duties was in fact not the main challenge, since they needed to balance their challenges as well in other professions: they saw the main challenge in the rumors, suspicions, accusations, and discourses attributed to them openly, which they sought to disregard as professional politicians.

Protecting their families, having time to educate their children, and keeping their personal lives out of the political arena were the central reasons why some of the women with whom I spoke had decided against politics, which they saw as a difficult space for women who wanted to avoid being hurt, whether as a woman, a wife, a mother, or a serious[16] and respected adult. They saw other jobs—even demanding and high-ranking ones—as less risky than politics. Nissibatou, for instance, claimed that, though she was a senior manager at a public enterprise, her family life remained far from the public eye. If she were offered an even more senior position, her main consideration would be whether her family responsibilities would allow her the time for it. But in any case, she did not want to enter politics because then she would become a public figure and risk being hurt. She acknowledged that as a business leader who had attended several women's-leadership courses, she was well qualified for politics, but she could imagine taking such a position only when her children would have finished their educations and left the household, but even once she were free of that responsibility, she would enter politics only if her husband agreed. Her answers reveal that conflicts over roles, expectations, and women's image in public are not the only major constraint on highly qualified women's entering politics, but that women seem to accept more inequality in the domestic sphere than in the workplace (Stepper 2020, 72).

In sum, women see it as a challenge to balance their life course and gender-specific role expectations and responsibilities with the requirements of politics; however, they demonstrate that their main challenge is not the workload, but the rumors, accusations, and images attributed to them about possible failures with regard to their life course and gender-related roles and tasks.

Men's Perspectives

"Today, it is easier for a woman to become a member of parliament than to become the mayor of a small village," said Tamou as we discussed the increased presence of women in the parliament of Benin in April of 2023.[17] Like other men with whom I talked in 2023, he welcomed women's increased representation in national politics. He considered women more trustworthy and reliable than men and, despite seeing difficulties for their becoming officials in villages as small as his, he did not oppose their participation in the wider political sphere.

His endorsement of women in politics surprised me a little, as he is seventy-five years old and deeply rooted in a rural lifeworld, where men dominate social relationships in the public sphere and represent family compounds there and women manage social relationships within households by organizing the preparation and distribution of food, care, marriage, and children's education; however, he argues that national politics suffers from a lack of trust that women would improve, and society should not let this opportunity pass.

Another research partner, Jean, made the same argument, despite his radically different social status—as a professor and former presidential adviser. He argued that women were more honest, better administrators of resources, and generally better organized than men. But despite both men's positive image of women, they doubted that women's presence could easily be increased at the highest and lowest levels of politics. Parliament was exceptional, as electoral laws could be changed and quotas instituted; however, both thought it almost impossible that voters would soon elect a woman president. Similarly, both said it would be extremely difficult for a woman to be elected mayor of a village in the countryside, since tasks like mediating conflicts are so closely related to what are locally seen as men's roles. They agreed that it remains difficult for women to work as politicians, since they would have more trouble managing many duties, like attending late-night meetings or frequently venturing from their households.

Tamou argued that it would be almost impossible for a woman to become the mayor of a town, but he knew that a woman had served for six years as a mayor in the neighboring district, only twenty kilometers away from his village; her mother had even been born in Tamou's village; however, he saw her career as unusual. While she was a mayor, from 2015 to 2020, only four of eighty-six cities in Benin were being governed by a woman.[18] Many of

my research partners and many people in Benin find it more acceptable for a woman to govern a city (or become a member of parliament) than a village, where gender norms are seen as too deeply seated for people to imagine a woman in charge.

The same holds for the presidency. Though Benin is largely dominated by male politicians—a fact widely lamented in the media and the object of many capacity-building institutions—mid-level positions like member of parliament, mayor, and city councillor are slowly opening up to women despite many constraints; however, all my interlocutors except Marie-Elise Gbedo, regardless of gender, still saw it as almost impossible for a woman to become the head of state.

Similar arguments from two men with such different economic, political, and educational backgrounds suggest that Beninese men's perceptions of women and evaluations of changing norms and gender roles might be less linked to their class positionalities than to their gender. In all social strata and class positionalities, men expressed strong sentiments against women in politics.

A certain resistance to the idea of women as political leaders is widespread in Benin, in every socioeconomic class. Popular men's beliefs are that women will have difficulties meeting expectations, should not leave their house at night, and are untrained in public speaking. This perspective parallels men's social backgrounds: male politicians in Benin have diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, both at local and regional levels and in parliament. Small farmers and traders who never went to school, like Yarou, do as members of parliament alongside professors, lawyers, and teachers. Various male positionalities are thus found at all levels of political representation in Benin.

"My Husband! My Husband!"

Marie-Elise Gbedo, while we were talking about gender roles and expectations, dramatically exclaimed: "*Mon mari! Mon mari!* Women are always talking about their husbands and how to satisfy them and arrange for their needs! This is even more prominent than talk about their children's needs! I know women who supported me and later said that they could not vote for me because their husbands did not like it."

Dealing with husbands and their needs was a constant theme in my conversations with women politicians. The relationship with the husband was more prominent than any other relatedness. Marianne, for instance, told me she always asks her husband for permission to travel, but she uses several tactics to get his permission, even if he is unwilling at first. Nissibatou said that, even though her professional position was higher than that of her husband, she would always ask for his permission before making important professional decisions. Clemence said she would have been unable to make her professional career without her husband's support and advice. Isabel said

her husband´s disagreement with her to become active in politics had led to her divorce him, and she had learned from that experience that she did not want to marry again. Women considered the question of how to interact with a husband a real challenge in their engagement in politics, more difficult than the question of how to combine mothering with politics. Many women reported that without their husbands' support, it would have been almost impossible to for them to become politicians. Two women noted that their husbands' activity in the same political party had made their lives easier. They saw supportive and protective men, as well as husbands who helped financially, as being ideal. Their decisions to enter politics, as well how they acted when starting their political careers, seem to have depended on their relationships with their husbands. This is a good example of the entanglements of the life trajectories of husband and wife: the decision might lead to a divorce, or it might be encouraged by a supportive husband. In contrast, male politicians never mentioned such an entanglement when talking to me about their careers: some said they would seek their wives´ advice, but none discussed with similar density how much his engagement in politics had affected his wife.

Some of my interview partners are divorced women—a status often described as the stereotype of a woman in politics. Some of the married women argued that they were publicly demonstrating that being married and having children could be combined with politics, but all the divorced ones avoided telling the public much about their personal lives. Some said they felt more independent because their husband had been less involved in their careers.

Many interlocutors saw a politician's need to stay out late for meetings as a major difficulty for a woman in politics. Here again, not only ideas about an appropriate female lifestyle, but possible rumors about spousal behavior are important, depending on different temporalities of the life trajectory and ideas about spousal relationships. Women seem never to be seen as independent from these relationships. In fact, conversations with my interlocutors confirmed Marie-Elise Gbedo's observation that husbands are given a major place and major importance in talk about women in politics.

In the conversations I had, other familial roles of women, especially their care responsibilities for children, were much less problematized. All women I spoke with presented their children not as obstacles to their roles as politicians. I initially found this surprising; however, it can be understood as part of women´s positionality. As almost all middle-class women in Benin who live in better-off households are working, as either professionals or traders, these activities already need to be combined with childcare, either organized at home and with relatives or domestic workers, or in formal institutions. With regard to childcare, politics are taken as another activity that requires that children be cared for during their mothers' absences. It does not seem to affect too much children's or mothers' roles, whereas spousal roles are presented as being affected by politics. Maybe it is presented as such because caring for one´s husband and fulfilling spousal duties and role

expectations are female activities that cannot be done by others, whereas caring for children can. Another reason for the discrepancy between spousal and parental roles might be that intensive care work for children is limited to specific phases in the life course. In consequence, many women enter politics only when the intensive phase of caring for children is finished. Marianne is an example of that, but Isabel declared that she had started more intensively with politics when her sons had left the household. That women politicians often problematized their spousal responsibilities and roles, and much less their children, might be understood as an argument that their engagement in politics reflects life course–related positionalities.

Politics as a Dirty Space

I was surprised by how often people called politics a dirty space, where people hurt one another. People mentioned that politicians often want to discredit each other and use any detail, rumor, or damaging information about a woman's private life to discredit her. The great majority of women in Benin see politics as a site of sexual harassment (Stepper 2020), and while many concede that such harassment is an omnipresent phenomenon, not limited to politics, they often considered it worse in politics. All women I talked to noted that having a powerful patron is necessary for women to advance in a political party; however, some explained that they are often suspected of having intimate relationships with their patrons.[19] Several women mentioned that having a husband active in the same party helped in this regard, but they still found the atmosphere toxic.

Mothers who do not want their daughters to be in that kind of environment invoke this argument when advising their daughters not to enter politics. Rehana, the wife of a cabinet minister, explained to me that she had worked hard to persuade her daughters to build professional careers instead of political ones. When I asked her about the new election law and the need of strong women who could become members of parliament, she burst out: "When I heard 'more women,' my first thought was 'more prostitution!'" But then, she added that if the presence of women could help tame politics and having twenty-four more women in parliament would reduce the amount of harassment, she would happily accept it. Of course, as a politician's wife, she might have had personal experience with the hurtful aspects or dark sides of politics. In any case, despite her positive view of her husband's political career, she does not want to see her daughters in that sphere; however, even one of her sons, despite being a student of law and politics, says that his father's experiences make him more interested in becoming a journalist than being a politician himself.

Some women contested the narrative of politics as a dirty space, claiming that they had never had any problem with harassment, and that women in politics just need to act confidently to avoid problems; however, all agreed that such self-confident behavior included not letting rumors about their

behavior and lifestyle get to them. One disappointing aspect of the "dirtiness," according to almost all women I talked with, is the lack of solidarity among women themselves.[20] The way women in politics repeated rumors instead of supporting each other came up in almost every conversation I had and was a reason why one of them had retired from the political arena. Strengthening the argument that characterizing politics as a dirty space might contribute to making it more difficult for women to decide for politics, almost all women in politics are politically engaged in gender-related issues. They are interested in women´s rights, in gender politics, and in questions of women´s health, and many of them are claiming that preparing their society for a real change in gender norms is a central motivation for them to engage in politics.[21]

Conclusion

The nation-state of Benin, like many other African states, has recently introduced a gender quota for women in parliament—a requirement that led to women's immediate increase in the 2023 elections. Such an increase deeply affects the presence of women in politics, not only in their symbolic representation, but in societal attitudes toward their leadership (Bauer 2012); however, this is not yet visible in Benin, where women's entrance into politics is limited by many constraints. In addition to structural facts, such as the need of economic resources that limit potential female politicians to educated middle-class women, and in addition to a generally still hostile environment, in which politics is seen, described, and imagined as a dirty space, women need to find ways of combining their social roles with the demands of politics. Many women worry about interfering with their familiar and spousal roles, but they argue that an increase of female politicians would be good for the whole society.

From an anthropological perspective of the life course, I outline that specific temporalities need to be considered, as, for instance, the fact that women´s refusal or willingness might change over their life course. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of Marianne, who cited the age of retirement as an appropriate moment to start her political activities; however, most importantly for gendered temporality, and more generally for women´s decision to enter politics, is the fact that women experience, see, and present their lives as deeply entangled with the trajectories of others and that any vital conjuncture could be seen, not as one of an individual alone, but as made and shaped by, and making and shaping, the trajectories of others. This might be true for men in politics, but it is more intensively presented by women.

The entangled vital conjunctures that lead to women´s decisions are affected by societal change. The rules of elections are but one example. A deeper understanding of the relations and relatedness of middle-class women might contribute to a better understanding of their political roles. Studies

so far have focused mostly on countries with the highest representation of women (Bauer 2012, 380). Benin is a good example of the opposite.

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NOTES

1. This article was accepted for publication on February 21, 2025.
2. To assure anonymity for my research partners, I have changed their names and the places where the conversations took place. This seems necessary in a nation-state where few women participate in politics. I use similar names and cities, giving a woman with a Christian name another Christian name; or I choose the name of a city similar in size and infrastructure.
3. Women in the United States need certain resources to finance their entrance into politics (Bernhard et al. 2021).
4. That this has not only been the case in Benin seems obvious; by 1992, Denzer was demonstrating that three women politicians in different West African countries in the late colonial era had come from families with an elite or middle-class background.
5. Women elsewhere in Africa are not as underrepresented as in Benin. In Uganda and South Africa, they occupy more than 30 percent of positions in national and local political institutions (Goetz and Hassim 2003). For Uganda, see also Tamale 1999.
6. On women in colonial and precolonial Benin, see Attanaso 2012, Stepper 2020, and the excellent overview by Reuther 2019.
7. For an extended review of women's status in Benin, including education and women's rights in postcolonial Benin, see Stepper 2020, 12–20.
8. The title of *The Amazon Candidate,* a documentary movie produced during one election campaign of Marie-Elise Gbedo, invokes the Amazons, mythological strong women.

9. *Autonomisation des femmes et égalité des genres | Programme de Développement des Nations Unies* (undp.org).
10. In April, 2023, conversations with Marie-Elise Gbedo and Nassirou Bako-Arifari, a member of parliament, confirmed that this law was a compromise between different interests: since it added new seats reserved for women, no man needed to give up his current seat.
11. Conversation with Dodji Amouzouvi and Imorou Abou-Bakari (April 2023).
12. My thanks go to Dieter Neubert and Lena Kroeker for stimulating discussions in the frame of the project "Middle Classes on the Rise," at the Bayreuth Academy of African Studies, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany.
13. Reasons for this can be found in the fact that for a long time, parents did not send all children to school, leading to a high degree of diversity among siblings (Alber 2019).
14. In several videos and messages, Marie-Elise Gbedo recognized the importance of Rosine Soglo as a role model and fighter for women´s presence in politics in Benin. See, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbUzX1QAxJc.
15. Bio Tchane, one of the best-known politicians in Benin, serves as a party leader and cabinet minister.
16. On the use of the phrase *to be serious* to mean "to become adult," see Cooper 2017.
17. See https://www.banouto.bj/article/politique/20230112-legislatives-2023-au-benin-liste-des-28-femmes-elues-deputes-selon-les-resultats-provisoires and https://sgg.gouv.bj/doc/loi-2019-43.
18. After the municipal elections of 2020, four of seventy-seven mayors were women. See https://mamabenin.com/2020/06/08/femmes-maires-du-benin.
19. Concerning the ambivalences of patronaje, see also Goetz 2003.
20. The same argument is made by Stepper (2020, 56).
21. See also Francis 2009, who observed the same for women politicians in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

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