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Avoiding gender determinism: Ivorian women between political challenges and economic recognition

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Abstract

As in many other countries, 8 March 2014 was celebrated in the Ivory Coast as another year's International Women's Day, serving to highlight the relevant role of women in universal development as a whole. The moment is a good one for taking a look at the progress of the question of gender in the Ivory Coast. This paper is intended to analyse the factors explaining the growing part played by women in political and economic matters in the Ivory Coast. It is also aimed at considering how women have won growing importance in both politics and the economy.

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1. Introduction

According to Rocío Castro (1992:9), over the course of history different societies have created social distinctions between the sexes so as to establish power relationships to the benefit of men in various areas of society: religious, political, public, work, or cultural spheres. In the Ivory Coast, beliefs, concepts, cultural values and assigned roles have subordinated women within society, the excuse being put forward that natural laws determine these differences.

K. Young (1979) made a distinction between sex and gender. As he saw it, sex is a biological given, while gender is the outcome of socialization, beginning from birth, which may show considerable variations from one culture to another. Simone de Beauvoir (1987) summed this up well by stating that people are not born women, they become women.

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Gender also includes the question of power and development. Betina Ronsisvalle (2011:3) linked development and power with equality between the sexes at the different levels of government and in decision-making bodies. On these lines, the inclusion of women in the decision-taking circles of power, together with other positive actions, would contribute to the process of democratization in the Ivory Coast.

The relationship between gender and development is striking in the Ivory Coast. This is because women have a crucial role, both in the north and in the south of the country, as will be seen below.

This paper will address a range of topics. These include the political situation of women in the Ivory Coast and their financial impact on the economy. This second aspect will be considered from the viewpoint of the production of shea butter or karité in the north of the country and the work as servants of women from the Baoulé ethnic group (their name is sometimes spelled Baule).

2. Methodological Approach

The methods employed incorporated qualitative techniques such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The first observation phase took place in 2013 in Korhogo, investigating a producer of shea butter. Over the whole year the process of its manufacture was observed, with note being taken of the development opportunities created by women from the north of the country. The second observation phase was carried out in Abidjan particularly among servant women. Field work with them was undertaken in the town of Abè, in the Department of Yamoussoukro. Of the five studied, two in particular attracted attention because of the topic under consideration: servant women as agents of development. This topic was addressed by observing women at a strategic point: the Easter or “Paquinou” festivities among the Baoulé. The degree of participation adopted was as recommended by Barbara Kawulich (2005). As this author sees it, the researcher in this context indeed forms part of the group under study, this group being aware of the research activity under way, and the participation being a fact. This was the state of affairs in the present study. In-depth interviews were also vital, since, as pointed out by Juan José Pujadas Muñoz (1992: 44-45), they are crucial when researchers are working on a group with which they share features and characteristics. The real names of the informants have been retained here, since they had no objections to this decision.

3. Analysis of Women’s Political Struggles in the Democratic Process in the Ivory Coast

The part played by Ivorian women in the social movements that have taken place over recent decades in the Ivory Coast as a reaction to conflicts affecting the poorer classes has been preponderant. Mari Koré and Raggi Anne Marie were leaders in demanding human rights. Despite this protagonism, Ivorian women have difficulty in coming to hold management posts in parties or other political organizations. Their leadership roles soon trickle away into the backward-looking anonymity at which women’s up-bringing aims. Whilst the feminist movement in western countries has accumulated a number of political triumphs over the course of its activities, Ivorian women are faced with greater responsibilities under much less favourable conditions. Women are still seen as the weaker sex and relegated to background roles. Inequalities are visible and cause women to lead lives untouched by development. Since 1945, the United Nations Organization has advocated the promotion of women. The Ivory Coast, being affiliated to the various international programmes aimed at this has stated its wish to favour full development of women.

Nonetheless, in the present-day Ivory Coast there is still discrimination which puts a brake on their participation in politics. As Fassler (2004:1) states, they have fewer resources and opportunities than men to develop their political capacities.

By way of exemplification, of the 197 communes in the country, in 2009 only nine had a woman at their head. Of 56 departments and districts, just one department had a woman leader. In 2013, out of the 255 deputies in the country’s Parliament, only twenty-five were women. The Commission for Economic and Financial Affairs of the Parliament was made up of forty men and two women. The Commission for General and Institutional Affairs had thirty-nine men and two women. The Commission for Foreign Affairs had a proportion of thirty-nine men to six women.

This disparity was also visible in the exercise of executive power, with only five women out of a total of thirty-two ministers. This puts the country in fifty-fourth place according to a United Nations report of 2014. Women, despite constituting more or less half of the population, are not well represented in decision-making spheres. Those few who

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