

Conference-debate report: Inclusion of women in electoral lists in the DRC



Report of the conference-debate on the inclusion of women in electoral lists

I. Background

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) in collaboration with its local partners the National Episcopal Conference of Congo through its Parliamentary Liaison Office (BLP/CENCO), the National Order of Electoral Experts (ONEEL), the Dynamics of Women Candidates (DYNAFEC) and the Network of Provincial and Local Elected Women (REFEPEL) organized a Conference-debate on the inclusion of women in electoral lists in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This conference took place on Saturday, October 15, 2022, in the New Building of the CENCO Interdiocesan Center in the Commune of Gombe.

In his introductory remarks, Mr. Francis Buhendwa, facilitator of the Conference, recalled the objective of this meeting, which was to assess the level of integration of gender parity through the electoral law; analyse related advocacy efforts and reflect on the opportunities and challenges faced by women politicians with a view to their participation in the next electoral cycle in 2023.

II. Conduct of the conference

1. Introductory session

Speaking on behalf of WFD, Mr. Jérôme Nengowe, Program Coordinator, in his welcoming remarks, praised the involvement and especially the importance that these 4 Congolese civil society organizations give to the thorny issue of the increased and active participation of women in the upcoming elections.

For his part, Father Georges Kalenga Masuka, 2nd Deputy Secretary General of CENCO, who had delivered the opening remarks, had insisted on the importance of the issue of women's access to elections and their contributions to the elevation of the nation.

In addition, the second Deputy Secretary General of CENCO had indicated that CENCO is constantly committed to the advancement of men and women without negative discrimination that would be based on gender differences. While hoping that this conference will be the prelude to an efficient integration of gender parity in the electoral law.

2. Presentation of the participants and their respective structures

After these words of circumstance and openness, the floor was given to the participants for the individual presentation, highlighting the activities carried out as a Civil Society Organization.

3. The interventions of the Panelists

The **first presentation** focusing on: "**The history and evolution of parliamentary advocacy leading to the adoption of Article 13 of the electoral law**" was developed by the Gender and Election Expert of UNWOMEN, Mr. Pacifique NKUNZI.

His intervention focused on four parts, namely:

- Introduction/ Legal instruments,
- The specific question of the electoral process,
- Advocacy achievements, and
- The evolution and advocacy results of the reform of the electoral law.

In his summary, the facilitator recalled the objective of parliamentary advocacy, which was to convince as many elected representatives (Deputies and Senators) as possible to support the cause of women to support the fight against inequalities to which they are subjected.

Advocacy stakeholders during the review and adoption of the law aimed to incorporate into the electoral law provisions stipulating that:

1. The lists of political parties and groupings of which at least half of the candidates are not composed of women should be declared inadmissible by the National and Independent Electoral Commission.
2. A quota should be set.
3. Provision should be made for sanctions against men who misbehave during the election campaign by making insulting remarks against women.

Despite the efforts made, these proposals have not been considered and have only been able to arrive at the current content of the last paragraph of article 13 of the electoral law, which provides that lists of political parties and groupings containing at least 50% women have been exempted from payment of the deposit.

The speaker noted that although the expected results have not been fully achieved, a step has been taken and an evolution on the appropriation of the issue of parity at the top of the State (Head of State, President of the National Assembly, and the Senate) is perceptible.

In his conclusion, he proposed that the advocacy efforts that led to the adoption of the last paragraph of article 13 of the electoral law be capitalized by civil society through mass training so that women are sensitized and understand the roles of a parliamentarian. That this awareness be made in synergy with other civil society organizations.

The **second intervention**, presented by Mr. Roger BUHENDWA, Secretary General of ONEEL, was based on the analysis of the electoral law in the light of the opportunity offered and the challenges raised for the inclusion of women in the electoral lists in its article 13.

The opportunity it offers is to allow certain political parties and groupings to be encouraged to line up women on their candidate lists to take advantage of the non-payment of the deposit.

However, challenges remain:

The first challenge is legal. Indeed, under the last paragraph of Article 22 of the electoral law: "Are also inadmissible the lists of the political party or grouping that have not reached 60 % of the seats in competition...". As a result, some political parties or groupings may align lists with at least half of the women but end up being side-lined because they have not met the requirement of Article 22 above.

The second challenge is that political parties and groupings with substantial financial means will not be tempted to field more women to take advantage of the last paragraph of article 13 of the electoral law. The latter is an incentive only for financially weak political structures.

The third challenge is that some political structures may be tempted to fill in the lists with women who are not or less competent and not politically engaged.

In his conclusion, he acknowledged that Article 13 was a step forward but that it would not solve the problem of the non-effectiveness of parity. There is a need to intensify advocacy because political parity cannot happen by itself. Proactive strategies must be formulated and concrete measures implemented.

The **third presentation** addressed strategies for the effectiveness of parity at the next revision of the electoral law.

This theme was addressed by two speakers.

Mrs. Carine NKAKU, Coordinator of DYNAFEC, thanked the WFD for supporting this framework of exchanges to refine strategies for the revision of the new electoral law in the future. For her, with the law already promulgated and the 2023 elections on the horizon, it has been focused on the strategies to be implemented to elect a significant number of women to the various elections.

Thus, she proposed to:

- Establish women's electoral platforms.
- Advocate with political parties and groupings for the implementation of a voluntary quota in line with the parity advocated by Article 14 of the Constitution.
- Find mechanisms to address the challenge of lack of financial means faced by women.
- Extend the popularization of the electoral law and make women aware in the provinces.
- Work at school level to inculcate the notion of parity from an early age.
- Assist women to become leaders of political parties and/or to create predominantly female political structures.

The second speaker on the same theme, Sister Nathalie KANGAJI, Executive Secretary of the Commission Episcopale Justice et Paix (CEJP) of the CENCO and in charge of the Women for

Development Dynamics at the CEJP began by thanking the organizers for having associated her with the conference.

In her introduction, she referred to the social doctrine of the catholic church and other legal instruments that enshrine gender parity and equality.

She addressed the issue related to previous statistics of the electoral process since 2006, 2011 and 2018 and noted that in each electoral cycle, there is always a decrease in the number of women candidates for national and provincial legislative elections.

She identified three major challenges that will need to be overcome:

- The low involvement of women in political formations
- Their less alignment on the lists of candidates
- The difficult access to financial and media resources

She had proposed the following actions:

- Sensitize women to join political parties and political groups.
- Awaken women's leadership by relying on grassroots and community associations.
- Strengthen the capacities of women involved in politics or associations on the role and importance of social networks.

In her conclusion, Sister Nathalie said she was optimistic about future struggles for the effectiveness of parity in the DRC.

4. Debates

Several speakers took the floor to congratulate WFD and all the civil society organisations that are supporting on this important issue of gender.

The interventions were more in the form of contributions than questions.

One participant wanted to know what partners can do to capitalise on the achievements of the new electoral law. She was told that all stakeholders, without exception, have an effort to make at the individual level to advance the cause of women, particularly in the political sphere. This is not a task for technical and financial partners alone. Civil society organisations, political parties, opinion leaders, ... have a role to play at their level.

A participant wondered whether the hidden purpose of Article 13 of the electoral law was to allow political parties not to pay the deposit and that the cause of women was only incidental. Mr Pacifique Nkunzi said that this was inconceivable and that the trap was rather in Article 22 paragraph 2, analysed above. For this reason, one of the speakers recommended that women members of small political parties should join the larger political parties if possible.

Several speakers returned to the risk of filling the lists with women candidates whose respective profiles do not correspond to the requirements of competence and morality of the position to be filled. They therefore insisted on the advocacy to be carried out to this effect with the political parties.

III. Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations made during the presentations and discussions, to save time, participants were asked to write on papers those they consider important in relation to the theme of the activity:

- 1) Multiply meetings (forum) on electoral strategies for the benefit of women.
- 2) Organise radio and television programmes to raise awareness on women's candidacies.
- 3) Reflect on the mechanisms that can help overcome prejudices and sexist stereotypes.
- 4) Raise awareness among the leaders of political parties on the voluntary quota.
- 5) Support the empowerment of women and girls.
- 6) Intensify sensitisation of women and men at provincial and local levels for the appropriation of the innovations of the electoral law.
- 7) Ensure that competent women candidates' lists are aligned to avoid filling the lists only to avoid paying the deposit.

Closing

A statement from WFD's local partners was read by Ms. Carine KANKU.

BLP/CENCO, DYNAFEC, ONEEL and REFPEL recalled the DRC's international and national commitments to parity and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. They commended the efforts of all stakeholders. They stressed that the current electoral law does not guarantee the full inclusion of women. To this end, they undertook to pursue in synergy the advocacy efforts for the effectiveness of parity and to implement and follow up the recommendations with the various stakeholders, particularly the political parties and groups.

The closing remarks of the conference-debate were delivered by Mr. Jean-Paul MULYANGA, Director of BLP/CENCO, who thanked all the panelists and participants for taking an active part in the activity.

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