

Law, Religion and Reconciliation in Africa



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20 SOCIO-POLITICAL FACTORS DETERMINING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOLLOWING THE 2019 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN SAVÈ, BENIN

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INTRODUCTION

Peace depends on the categories of actors concerned with life in society. However, conflicts of various origins can arise and handicap the peace that is essential for living together and for the development of a nation. Preventing, managing and successfully resolving a dispute requires the deployment of multiple strategies and systemic, differentiated approaches. In particular, a gender dimension is at work in the social field of conflicts. This is because women and men, who are already affected differently by a given conflict, do not have the same perceptions on issues of peace, conflict and peacebuilding strategies.²

The role of women in prevention, management and peacebuilding is a topical issue.³ Conflict prevention is about taking precautions and defining the necessary strategies, in terms of attitudes, skills and behaviours, to avoid the occurrence of conflicts. Conflict management occurs when it has not been possible to prevent conflict. In this case, it is a question of developing strategies and implementing measures and initiatives to find lasting solutions in order to put a definitive end to the conflict, its origins and its negative impacts. Peacebuilding is linked to peace management and requires that high-quality strategies, approaches and resolution initiatives applied. If resolution procedures are not effective, they will not lead to peacebuilding. Peacebuilding, therefore, encompasses everything that is undertaken to manage a conflict effectively and sustainably and to return to coexistence without frustration and without the seeds of the recurrence. In traditional African

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2 See Réseau des Organisations Féminines d'Afrique [Network of Women's Organisations of Africa] (ROFAF). 2013. "Le rôle de la femme pour une paix durable en Afrique" [The Role of Women for Sustainable Peace in Africa], August 8; Iloh EC, Okafor UC and Oghomitse RO. 2019. "The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution in Rwanda: Lessons for Peace Building in Nigeria", ResearchGate, 30-41.

3 Ndioro N. 2001. "Le rôle des femmes dans les conflits en Afrique et la réponse de l'OIM" [The Role of Women in Conflict in Africa and IOM's Response]. Speech by Ms. Ndioro Ndiaye to the Deputy Director General of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), presented at the African Forum for Partnership for Development, Accra, Ghana, 1-8 September 2001, ch 24.

communities, women have played a leading role in this context.⁴ Their legitimacy and capacity in this area depends on their age and social, economic and political status. However, with colonisation, women's experiences in this area were ignored. This state of affairs is due to the failure to adopt more modern social and political structures than those that already exist.⁵

In Africa, several countries have been rocked by socio-political conflicts of relatively long duration and intensity. While Benin, for a long time, was considered a country of peace, blessed by God and spared from political violence, recent electoral crises, including the one resulting from the 2019 legislative elections, have belied this thesis.⁶ The crisis in question here is the result of a set of political decisions and acts implemented by the reforms of the current regime. These decisions and acts concerned the revision of the electoral code and the obtaining the discharge of sponsorship documents. In the end, only two parties supporting the government's action were able to meet the demands for reform around these elections. Opposition parties were excluded from the electoral competition. The movement's parties and their relatives accused the opponents of boycotting the reforms. Opposition parties, in turn, accused the state apparatus of a clear desire to organise non-inclusive electoral contests aimed at removing opponents. A political crisis is emerging, and attempts to resolve this crisis have been in vain. The legislative elections were therefore held with the two political parties in power. Conflicts erupted in some parts of the country. Although the electoral crisis has led to general social tensions, some localities have been particularly affected, namely Parakou, Bantè, Tchaourou and Savè. In these places, the political crisis has escalated into an open confrontation between security forces and protesters.

To deal with this electoral crisis, a peacemaking process was launched. The process has seen the participation of a significant number of women, but men tend to occupy exclusively the positions of influence within the peace committee that was created. However, three factors are important. First, Benin is a democratic state that affirms its commitment to the principle of equality. Second, Benin is committed to implementing the provisions of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality.⁷ Efforts have been made by the Beninese government

4 ROFOF, "Le rôle de la femme pour une paix durable en Afrique"; Sahel Club of West Africa. 2006. "Femmes, gouvernance endogène et prévention des conflits en Afrique de l'Ouest" [Women, Endogenous Governance and Conflict Prevention in West Africa]. Workshop organised by the Sahel Club of West Africa/OECD, 26-28 April 2006, vol 1, Synthesis Report, Governance, Conflict Dynamics, Peace and Security Unit.

5 Goerg O. 1997. "Femmes africaines et politique : les colonisées au féminin en Afrique occidentale" [African Women and Politics: The Colonised Women in West Africa], *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés* [CLIO. Women, Gender, History], 6.

6 Kakai SF. 2012. "Contestation, conflit et violence en période électorale au Bénin" [Contestation, Conflict and Violence in the Electoral Period in Benin], *Revista Română de Studii Internaționale* [Romanian Review of International Studies] 7:17-48.

7 See UN Ministry of Economic and Social Affairs. 2023. "Sustainable Development: The 17 Goals," Goal 5. Available from: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

and feminist movements, particularly in the areas of education, health and the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) at the legal level. Politically and operationally; however, these efforts are still tentative.⁸ Finally, since 2010, United Nations Resolution 1325 on Peace and Security has recommended that measures be taken to ensure that women are seen not only as victims of a crisis, but also as actors in the restoration of society.⁹ Efforts to implement this resolution are not yet significant at the level of the Beninese state, probably due to the recent electoral conflict.

In the case of the electoral crisis in Savè and the 21-person Crisis Management Committee that emerged to resolve it, men constituted 57% and women 43% of both the Committee itself and its Executive Bureau, or board. Moreover, all of the leadership positions, including the president, secretary, treasurer and information officer, were held by men. This relative lack of women in official positions reflects an underestimation of women's abilities and skills to lead a peacebuilding process, in a way that is at odds with the history and tradition of women as peacebuilding leaders in conflict management in Savè. While participation rates in the peace committee and its officer ranks place Savè in the category of cases where women have been involved, their occupation of high-influence leadership positions is similar to the general trend in Africa. For example, between 1990 and 2017, women accounted for 2% of conflict mediators and 8% of negotiators worldwide, according to the UN.¹⁰ A recent political agreement signed on 18 October 2016 for the organisation of elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo provided for an 18% participation of women in the negotiations and among the signatories, which was probably the reason for the inclusion of gender issues in the organisation.¹¹

This chapter focuses on the town of Savè, which was shaken by the conflict surrounding Benin's 2019 legislative elections. The research problem focuses on the exclusive occupation of leadership positions by men in the crisis management committee that was set up as part of the peacebuilding process in the wake of the

8 Toungakouagou Sama TS. 2023. "Les implications sociales de la loi relative aux dispositions spéciales de répression des infractions commises à raison du sexe des personnes et protection de la femme en République du Bénin : protection et effectivité de l'égalité au profit des femmes" [The Social Implications of the Law on Special Provisions for the Punishment of Offences Committed on the Basis of the Sex of Persons and Protection of Women in the Republic of Benin: Protection and Effectiveness of Equality for the Benefit of Women], *DJIBOUL Revue Scientifique des Arts-Communication, Lettres, Sciences Humaines et Sociales* [Scientific Review of Arts – Communication, Letters, Human and Social Sciences] 2(5):576-589.

9 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, S/Res/1325 (2000).

10 Noma E, Aker D, and Freeman J. 2012. "Heeding Women's Voices: Breaking Cycles of Conflict and Deepening the Concept of Peacebuilding", *Peacebuilding and Development Review* 7(1):7-32.

11 Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF/UN Women). 2017. *Promouvoir la participation des femmes dans le processus de paix en Afrique francophone* [Promoting Women's Participation in the Peace Process in Francophone Africa]. Report of the international seminar at the Hotel Tiama, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 17 and 18 November, 2016.

electoral crisis. The research question of this chapter is formulated as follows: What are the socio-political factors that explain the exclusive occupation of positions of influence by men in the process of rebuilding living together following the crisis that followed the 2019 legislative elections in Benin?

The results suggest that the devaluation of the traditional socio-political status of Tchabè women is the reason for the absence of women. The present research therefore aims to report on the level of quantitative and qualitative participation of women in the peacebuilding process. A primarily qualitative approach was used for the study, including both a literature review on women's leadership studies in peacebuilding and individual interviews conducted in the field. The fieldwork took place from January to March 2023 in the city of Savè. About 50 people were interviewed, representing traditional leaders of local communities, stakeholders and victims of the conflict, men and women involved in the management of local conflicts and perhaps particularly important for an inquiry into law and religion supporters of the Tchabè deities.

The theoretical approach used in this research is the combines socio-cultural and gender approaches. The socio-cultural approach highlights the importance of culture in the understanding of social facts. The gender perspective captures the differentiated participation of men and women in conflict and its management. Among the sites affected by the protests of this crisis, the city of Savè was chosen because the clashes there were significant and lasted longer there, while they were sporadic elsewhere.

The results are structured around four points: the narrative of the post-election crisis, the cultural history of Tchabè women in relation to conflict management, Tchabè women as mediators and, finally, the discussion and conclusions. The first part gives a summary account of the contours of the socio-political crisis in Savè, focusing on the different protagonists. The second part focuses on the role and place of Tchabè women in traditional society in relation to conflict management. The third part examines the role played by women in the socio-political crisis surrounding the 2019 legislative elections in Benin. The last part analyses the results of this research in relation to previous work in other contexts.

THE POST-ELECTION, SOCIO-POLITICAL CRISIS IN BENIN

Context of social and economic crisis

The electoral conflict in Savè was a political conflict that took place in a context of social and economic crisis. The protagonists linked the crisis to the refusal to conform to the demands of the democratic game. Some have justified this by the exclusion of opposition parties from the 2019 parliamentary elections and the non-consensual reforms that have been taken. As one interviewee stated:

The real cause is exclusively political. There are several political parties in the country, and they have all participated in previous elections. But from

revision to revision of the constitution, some parties have been eliminated, first by the increase in the obligations to be paid, then by the 10% law and also by the problems of paying taxes. This is what caused the discontent that led to the violence we saw in Savè in 2019 and 2021.¹²

For others, the source of the conflict was the opponents' non-adherence to political reforms.

These are the reforms that have not pleased the opponents, and they have not been able to respect them. It was the opponents' refusal to respect the rules of the electoral game that led to the crisis or to the desire to impose something on the rulers that was not pre-established. The naysayers want it to happen the way they want it to, but we have to respect the laws.¹³

These political challenges were preceded and exacerbated by a socio-economic crisis that was both natural and international. In particular, it was marked by a crisis of youth unemployment and underemployment that created a situation in which young people could be manipulated and corrupted by politicians. In addition to this socio-economic crisis, there were political divisions that marred living together in society, including mistrust between relatives and relatives of different political parties, lack of social policy, provocative remarks between the parties involved and discriminatory treatment between supporters of the government and the opposition.

Political protagonists supported by apolitical actors

Responsibility for the crisis has been attributed to the political authorities, the army and the population. At the level of the political class, it is worth noting in particular the role of the executive which initiated the reforms, the legislative branch which passed the laws and the political parties which supported or opposed the electoral reforms. Essentially, there were two groups of actors at odds: those who supported electoral reforms and those who opposed them. The former called for elections to be held and the latter called for a boycott of the elections. There were also protesters, mainly young opposition party activists and their supporters, who were excluded from the party's base.

The protests began with peaceful marches. The demonstrators carried out a series of actions gradually, including throwing sticks and stones. Then, they blocked intersections, roundabouts, constructions, internal roads, access roads and finally the highway. They set fire to public buildings and destroyed homes and private property belonging to some political leaders and opponents. They resorted to physical violence and verbal threats, and they even resorted to the use of occult forces. Efforts to negotiate with the protesters were unsuccessful. Faced with the scale of the clashes, the police were reinforced by the army. The armed forces

12 Interview with T.G., member of the opposition party, by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, January 2023.

13 Interview with S.K., a man and member of the opposition party by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, January 2023.

fired live ammunition at protesters, arrested and imprisoned some of them, stormed refreshment stands and consumed free drinks. Clashes broke out between protesters and security forces, and some protesters participated in the beating and even abduction of members of the armed forces. All the protesters were eventually repressed and arrested by the security forces. But they managed to block the delivery of election materials to most polling stations, and these actions prevented elections from taking place in some polling stations in Savè. The city was placed under military surveillance and curfew. The curfew handicapped all mobility and socio-economic activity during the crisis.

Multidimensional consequences seen beyond stakeholders

Most respondents to this study on the 2019 electoral crisis in Benin cited negative consequences; however, it is important to note at the outset that some have reported positive personal, cultural and political consequences. In terms of the personal consequences for individuals, as one interviewee stated:

On an individual level, some people have taken on the role of whistleblowers. They have taken advantage of this crisis to eat away at the state by saying that they are the masters of the field and that they receive personal funds. There is a part of the corrupt youth who have benefited from material goods, such as motorcycles.¹⁴

The positive cultural repercussions at the group level were reflected in the recognition of the bravery of the demonstrators, the importance of supernatural forces, the consideration of the liberated demonstrators as heroes and the reputation of the city of Savè, both nationally and internationally, as a city rebelling against anti-democratic practices. The positive political impact of this conflict was also reflected in the participation of opponents in the 2023 parliamentary elections.

The negative consequences have been multifaceted and multidimensional and have affected a range of actors and sectors of society, even those not involved in the crisis, such as women, children and the elderly. On the social front, there was loss of life among demonstrators, security forces and the population. Most of the women interviewed said they had lost the most from the crisis. In this regard, one of the interviewees said: "We women have been the big losers. Pregnant women and our children died because we couldn't go to care, we couldn't go out. Our children were killed during his protests, and some were hit by stray bullets. Our husbands died, some of them suddenly became widowers like me, and our children are still in prison."¹⁵ Cases of psychosis and other psychological and mental disorders have been reported among children and the elderly along with other grave harms. In addition, some people are still in detention and exile, mistrust has developed

14 Interview with A.K., a male witness, by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, February 2023.

15 Interview with M.T., woman who was a victim of the 2019 electoral violence, by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, March 2023.

between brothers, relatives and friends of different political persuasions. Indeed, the fear of the recurrence of a possible crisis has destroyed the conditions for peaceful coexistence.

Economically, the city of Savè has been negatively affected. During the curfew period, no socio-economic activities could be carried out. In addition, the city's toll bridge was ransacked and refreshment stands were invaded and emptied. Workers in the informal sector, including women, have been particularly affected. Public and private buildings were ransacked, houses hit by bullet holes and military equipment set on fire. Referring to the losses that have befallen women, one interviewee said of the effects of the crisis: "As a result, there is loss of life: deaths of pregnant women. Due to lack of care, others have lost children. Premature widowers, women are economically vulnerable."¹⁶

Politically, the clashes have had the effect of depreciating the country's image. Benin has ceased to be regarded internally and externally as a country of peace and the promotion of democracy. As one respondent attested:

Speaking of negative consequences, you should know that this is where there are a lot of losses. There has been a halt to all economic activity in the municipality, and so far, things have struggled to take off and return to what they were. The parents have lost the brothers' children, and the wounded are struggling. Innocent people were hit. People had to leave the city to seek refuge elsewhere. Fear has set in with the sounds of gunfire to the point that today, when a tire on a large vehicle bursts, people first pack their bags to flee before trying to find the source of the noise they just heard.¹⁷

The above statement summarises some of the consequences that the people of Savè suffered during the unrest.

Various initiatives have been taken to put an end to the political crisis in Savé. There have been mediation efforts on the part of national or local authorities and political figures, as well as sensitisation of local political authorities, elders, notables and prefectural authorities of all persuasions. There was the organisation of a national conference and the creation of joint peace committees. Resource persons on the ground have set up resources for peace management and mediation, including Savè natives living both in the country and in the diaspora, as well as those working in local and international non-governmental organisations. Finally, there were prayer sessions, masses, sermons and religious sacrifices organised by religious authorities of all persuasions and worship sacrifices by traditional religious leaders.

16 Interview with A.I., female opinion leader, by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, February 2023.

17 Interview with D.E., representative of men and youth, with TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, March 2023.

WOMEN AS MEDIATORS

Women have taken an active part in the peace-building process in Savè. Among the activities they carried out were a peaceful women's march to demand peace and awareness-raising sessions at the neighbourhood level, including in families and markets. These sensitisation sessions included personal sensitisation initiatives for individuals, as well as group activities in peace committees organised for this purpose. Actors conducive to such participation include: social biases in favour of conflict management and peacebuilding, association membership or political status, skills in the field of conflict management and social status in a gender-sensitive socio-political context. Among the social and gender biases that have encouraged women to participate is the conception of women as a symbol of peace, gentleness and fertility, especially as a mother and pillar of the family.

As noted toward the beginning of this chapter, as a result of the 2019 election violence in Savè, a 21-member Crisis Management Committee was set up at the communal level. It included, among others, political authorities, religious leaders and members of civil society organisations, including young men and women. There were twelve men and nine women on the Crisis Management committee – 57% and 43%, respectively.¹⁸ The Executive Committee was composed of seven people, consisting of four men and three women. The important positions of President, Secretary, Treasurer and Information Officer were held by men, and the secondary positions of Vice-President, Assistant Secretary and Assistant Treasurer were held by women. It is significant that many of the religious leaders on the Committee were men. The members of the Committee were representatives of the government at the departmental or prefectural level and local elected representatives of the ethnic group and local elected officials, all participating in an official capacity, while the members of the Committee represented civil society, the informal sector and the local community. This situation, in which men have more power over peacebuilding, deriving from their official and elected status, contrasts with the place of women in the field of peace in Tchabè society, which has been important historically and traditionally and still is today.

HISTORY OF TCHABÈ WOMEN IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Women mediators and peacemakers in the history of Tchabè

In traditional Tchabè society, the presence of women was remarkable in the management of all aspects of life, but especially in the management of conflicts. Women like Iyalode and Iyalodja were historical figures who participated in decision-making at the Savè Palace, and they serve as role models for today's women peacemakers. The name Iyalode comes from *Iya*, which means woman or mother, and *lodé*, which means outdoor. Iyalode was a Tchabè woman whose

¹⁸ The religious confessions concerned are: the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church, and the Muslim community.

mission was to report to the king all facts, events and actions that could hinder the proper functioning of the kingdom. In the event of a conflict between the Kingdom of Savè and the other kingdoms, she was part of the delegation responsible for conducting investigations and steps for the restoration of peace and negotiation. The name Iyalodja combines the term *Iya*, meaning mother or wife, and *lodja*, which is the word for market. Iyalodja was a Tchabè woman who was responsible for collecting goods in kind and cash for the kingdom.

In the same way, Iya Oba's position, consisting of the terms *Iya* (mother) and *Oba* (king), represents the status of the king's biological or social mother. Her advice and recommendations were taken seriously by the king. Iya Oba had the power to influence royal decisions and conflict management. Among the Tchabè, there was also a queen by the name of Inin Mego, who distinguished herself in the management of traditional political life. The name Inin Mego is synonymous with generosity and hospitality. She was the only woman to have come to power in the royal court of Savè without being enthroned as queen. Inin Mego was involved in actions for the prevention and management of peace, in particular through the repatriation of survivors of a disaster as part of the reconstruction of the Tunisian capital and the construction of high walls along the Ayin riverbank, which limited the city at the time, in order to guard against possible enemy invasions.

Deities and Conflict Management in Traditional Tchabè Society

The story below accounts for the existence of a mythical female character among the Tchabè, Yèbabédji who, through his qualities as a promoter of peace, has become a deity still venerated in Tchabè communities today.

Yèbabédji was a woman like any other, but today she has become a female deity worshipped by the Tchabè community. The site of the deity is in the Kingoun district. According to accounts, she was the daughter of the first king of the Omon'è.

At the time, Babaguidai, a man who was a key figure in the city and endowed with mystical powers, often solicited by the king for consultations with the Fa, also wanted the throne. To fulfill his ambition to become king, he transformed himself into a giant eagle with the help of his power and came to the city to assume a status he had previously turned into a talking fetish.

When he picked it up, he whistled or screamed like a human being. People began to mourn the loss of one of their own without trying to figure out if it was really a human being. Only one family member was thought to be missing, but no family reported the absence of any of its members.

When news reached the king that a giant eagle had kidnapped the people of the village, he was forced to ask Babaguidai to consult with the Fa on the steps to be taken to restore peace and stability among the people. Thus, the oracle of Babaguidai reveals that human sacrifices are necessary for peace to return. The person destined for the sacrifice must then be of royal blood, precisely a child of the king. A dilemma arose, as the king was not ready to sacrifice one of his children.

But the news had spread everywhere, and even the king's daughter (Yèbabèdji) had been informed of it. She went to the palace and saw the king sad. She asked the king about the cause of her sadness. She let her father know that she was aware of the Fa's predictions. She also told him of her willingness to sacrifice herself to avoid conflict and preserve peace in the country. But she demanded to be buried alive in her husband's neighborhood so that she could be better regarded, worshipped, and cared for by her children, once she became a deity. Hence its presence in the district of Kingoun instead of Tchéou.¹⁹

Several messages can be deduced from this story. First of all, conflict is not a new reality in Savè. In the past, there was conflict between men in this community, but a woman's sense of sacrifice made it possible to resolve the conflict in a lasting way. This sense of sacrifice saved an entire community from negative and destructive consequences.

This account is corroborated by the following statement by a traditional religious leader from Savè interviewed as part of the research for this chapter.

This deity is considered to be the foundation or main element of the traditional society of the Hab. If it had not been for the presence of Yèbabèdji, the town of Savè would have already been destroyed. In all areas, the veneration of Yèbabèdji allows one to have a perfect resolution or success. As when there is no rain, we implore Him to ask for rain. We then ask everyone to bring water and pour it to the place where the deity resides and this water must stick to the nearest natural channel. If this is done as requested, it will inevitably rain on the same day. In the management or prevention of conflicts, it is enough to implore it and to make requests or sacrifices for the good of the ecclesial community. It is thanks to his presence that we did not suffer excessive quantitative damage during the crisis that hit the municipality of Savè in 2019. If there had been information about this crisis, sacrifices would have been made to ask for his clemency in order to avoid the worst.²⁰

This account shows the extent of this deity's prerogatives to prevent and resolve conflicts between man and nature. Because of its importance, this deity is worshipped on the one hand, to prevent and on the other hand, to manage conflicts. In the minds of the interviewees, its solicitation, although belated, helped to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis.

19 Story of A.I., dignitary participating in ceremonies celebrated at the deity of Yèbabèdji in the context of the political crisis in Savè, Benin, February 2023, as told to TS Toungakouagou Sama.

20 Interview with K.Y., a male and representative traditional religious leader, by TS Toungakouagou Sama. Savè, Benin, March 2023.

Tchabè proverbs and expressions on women in conflict management

The Tchabè have a number of proverbs and expressions related to women in conflict management.²¹ The first term, which relates to damage caused by armed conflict, reads as follows:

Ogun ni shini mu, epi ki shini Curses don't kill the innocent,
War, but women and children while death can kill women and children.

The message conveyed by this sentence is that the curse affects only the cursed person, while war ravages the innocent, including women and children, who are among those affected. The message is that it is war that chooses its adversaries badly. The devastation caused by the armed conflict spares no one, including women and children. The second expression, relating to the role of women in conflict, is as follows:

A Woman's Voice The female voice can change a
The man of Rome. the heart of man.

The idea is that a woman's voice can psychologically disarm a man. In other words, the presence of women in conflict resolution can dispel dissension. This message emphasises, on the one hand, the importance of women in conflict resolution and, on the other hand, on the natural qualities of women in conflict resolution. A third expression, on women's capacities as mediators, is:

All the places where women Wherever the woman is,
This is Ashéori Mawa It was a success.

This expression equates women with the key to the success of mediation. It emphasises the importance of women in conflict resolution and that they are good mediators with people in conflict. A fourth expression, connecting women as mediators to the divine is:

A Woman's Love A Woman's Will
Love of music It is also God's will.

This means that if the woman's will is God's, those who are in conflict can go through the woman to settle their differences. This ascribes an almost divine importance to women in conflict resolution. Finally, there is the expression:

It's a woman's voice A Woman's Voice
Oto Okunrin is different from that of a man.

The message highlights the fact that women seek to use peaceful and flexible means to resolve conflicts, unlike men, who are quick to resort to aggressive means. This difference in views between women and men reflects the differences in views between men and women on this issue.

21 Field data from research, collected by the author. Savè, Benin, January-February 2013.

The above terms reflect the key role of women in conflict management and in promoting a climate of peace in Tchabè culture. Women are seen as promoters of peace and the key to conflict resolution. The expressions suggests both natural qualities and divergent perspectives between men and women, which work in favour of women as mediators in conflict resolution.

THE WOMEN OF SAVÈ: STRANGERS TO THE CRISIS, WORKERS FOR PEACE

Although women were not involved in the socio-political conflict, they were socially affected and mobilised to build peace. Women are often strangers to crises, but victims of their consequences. The socio-political crisis that arose in Savè in the run-up to the 2019 legislative elections was a political crisis facilitated by the context of a broader national social crisis. The root causes are related to an opposition over the relevance and timeliness of reforms, which some saw as important and others as non-inclusive. The conflict has mobilised around political protagonists, actors from other spheres of social life.

The negative consequences of the electoral crisis were felt both by the protagonists and by their collateral victims, including women, the elderly, young people and children. The negative economic and social consequences have been borne by women. They have not been able to carry out their income-generating activities and have experienced the death of their spouses, children and relatives, or the prolonged absence of those who were incarcerated, sent on the run or into exile. The impact of this crisis on the women of Savè is comparable to that reported by other studies, which have shown that women pay a heavy price in political crises, even those in which they are not involved.²² However, exceptional cases of women's participation in conflict have also been documented, as is the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,²³ Namibia²⁴ and Liberia.

In particular, faced with the negative consequences of the electoral crisis, the women of Savè mobilised to find solutions. They took the initiative and participated in the initiatives of others at the local level. They are represented on the Crisis Management Committee and its Executive Bureau. Their 43% representation on both the Committee and its Executive Committee, although not strictly equal compared to the men's 57% majority, was relatively high in view of global and regional trends. Women's participation has been fostered by their social and political status, the favourable national political environment and women's overall competence on the ground at the local level in community intervention.

22 See Ndiaro, "Le rôle des femmes dans les conflits en Afrique et la réponse de l'OIM"; ROFOF, "Le rôle de la femme pour une paix durable en Afrique"; Sahel Club of West Africa, "Femmes, gouvernance endogène et prévention des conflits en Afrique de l'Ouest"; Iloh et al., "The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution in Rwanda".

23 See Nfundiko JS. 2015. "Femmes du Sud-Kivu, victimes et actrices en situation de conflit et postconflit" [Women of South Kivu, Victims and Actors in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations], *Heredote* 3(158):182-199.

24 See Cleaver T and Wallace M. 1990. *Namibia, Women in War*. London: Zed Books.

Research on women's participation in the reconstruction of the river has been carried out around the world, including in Africa. Some studies have shown low quantitative participation in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and Senegal.²⁵ Other studies have highlighted the strong involvement of women in peacebuilding processes in Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa and Liberia.²⁶ It should be noted that these studies have generally not provided exact figures on women's participation rates in these bodies, with the exception of global data published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which quantified women's global participation in peacemaking processes at only 9% overall.²⁷ On a global scale, the participation of the women of Savè at a level of 43% is particularly noteworthy.

In fact, the participation of Savè women in peacebuilding can be compared to the notable rate of Rwandan women in achieving peace after their bloody genocide. Factors explaining the high involvement of women in Rwanda included the deaths of many men in the conflict, the high number of refugees, and the integration of many men into rebel movements. These leading to a higher level of involvement of Rwandan women differ from those observed in other regions and include socio-political status, personal relationships,²⁸ women's vulnerability and social biases in favour of women in conflict management and peacebuilding.²⁹ Other factors that may motivate women to participate in an association include membership in an association in general, social and political status, skills in the field of conflict management and a strong personality and charisma.³⁰ There are similarities between the results of these studies and those of the present research.

These global and African regional studies provide an overview of Savè women's participation in the Crisis Management Committee and other decision-making bodies set up after the 2019 electoral crisis in Benin. The exclusive occupation of decision-making positions under the influence of men, however, contrasts with the reality of conflict management in traditional Tchabè society, where leading roles in conflict management have historically been played by women in the royal court

25 OIF, *Promouvoir la participation des femmes dans le processus de paix en Afrique francophone*.

26 See Iloh et al. "The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution in Rwanda"; Sisulu L. 2019. "Women should be at the centre of conflict resolution," says South African minister 8 March. Issifu AK. 2015. "The Role of African Women in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: The Case of Rwanda," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 8(9):63-78.

27 See Noma et al., "Heedking Women's Voices".

28 Awadh M and Shuja'adeen N with Al-Refaei S and Colburn M. 2019. *Women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Yemen*. New York: UN Women.

29 See UNESCO. 2003. *Women and Peace in Africa: Case Study of Traditional Conflict Resolution Practices*. UNESCO: Paris.

30 Mbédé VN. 2003. "Radioscopie de la paix dans les traditions camerounaise. La médiation traditionnelle des conflits par les femmes au Cameroun" [Radioscopy of peace in Cameroonian traditions. Traditional conflict mediation by women in Cameroon], in UNESCO. *Les Femmes et la paix en Afrique: études de cas sur les pratiques traditionnelles de résolution des conflits* [Women and peace in Africa: case studies of traditional conflict resolution practices]. UNESCO: Paris, 29-36.

and in local communities up to the present day. A woman's level of involvement and sense of sacrifice are opportunities to prove and demonstrate her worth on the field. However, the high valuation of modern political structures, the devaluation of traditional figures for the promotion of peace and the non-valourisation of women in traditional and modern religious structures contribute to the current situation and the questioning of women's traditional leadership in reconciliation and peacebuilding.

In summary, the results of this study are consistent with those of other studies that explain the low quantitative and qualitative presence of women in conflict management forums in other contexts. The specificity of this research lies in the fact that it focuses on a political conflict at the national level that has given rise to peacebuilding efforts at the municipal level. In the local context, the research has shown an appreciable quantitative and qualitative participation rate, with a decline in decision-making positions contrasting with the preponderant roles attributed to women in this field in traditional society. Some of the factors identified by the research for this chapter include: cultural norms and justifications, the rigidity of the modern conflict resolution system,³¹ the lower social and political status of women, lack of decision-making power, and the lack of appropriate alternative structures.³²

CONCLUSION

Women, as social actors, are involved in all socio-human activities, whether as initiators, actors or victims. For a long time, women have been perceived as victims of conflicts arising from situations to which they sometimes have no connection to each other in terms of origins and manifestations. International measures, such as UN SDG 5 on gender equality and UN Resolution 1325 on women and peacemaking, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, show the importance of considering women not only as victims, but also as agents when it comes to conflict management and peacebuilding. This commitment of international law to women's participation and peace, alongside the analysis of this chapter, is an opening to examine the perceptions, concerns, needs and interests of women in the mediation and peacebuilding process.

The present research aims to account for the quantitative and qualitative level of women's participation in the resolution of the socio-political crisis of Savè and the explanatory factors that underlie it. We must not forget that this crisis is due to political causes. These causes come up against a favourable social context. The main actors in the conflict have allied themselves with the actors who sympathised with their respective positions at the beginning and during the protests of this crisis. If women were not the initiators and actors of the crisis, they were the victims and the actors of the reconstruction of the conditions of living together. The results show

31 OIF, *Promouvoir la participation des femmes dans le processus de paix en Afrique francophone*.

32 Abdi M. 2003. "Role of Somali women in the search for peace, Understanding conflicts in Somali society" in UNESCO, *Women and Peace in Africa*, 79-95.

that the rate of quantitative representation in the Committee and its governing bodies is acceptable. However, the positions held are secondary for the cultural and political reasons mentioned above.

This contrasts with the role and place of women in conflict management and resolution in Tchabè culture. The historical figures of women, the existence of a peacemaking deity and numerous proverbs and expressions reflect the central role of women in mediating and resolving conflicts and promoting peace and coexistence in Tchabè society. These lessons and the wisdom of Tchabè's past continue to influence the women of Savè, most recently in their quest for more seats at the peacebuilding negotiating table in the wake of Benin's 2019 electoral crisis.