

Women Organising in Senegal: *Charmaine Pereira* speaks with *Codou Bop*

Codou Bop is a longstanding feminist in Senegal, co-founder and coordinator of the organisation GREFELS (*Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes et les Lois au Senegal*) or Research Group for Women and Laws in Senegal. The conversation below took place between Dakar and Abuja, via Skype, in January 2017. Codou's strategic positioning at the nexus of local, national, and transnational feminist organising highlights the recursive relations among these different levels and ways in which they contribute to the strengthening of synergy among interconnected feminist struggles within Senegal. Whilst deep-rooted obstacles to gender equality remain, particularly at the level of political leadership, new groups of politically mobilised Senegalese women are beginning to change power relations in the society, in rural as well as urban spaces.

Charmaine Pereira: Can you tell us about your organisation and give us some sense of the background to it?

Codou Bop: GREFELS is a member of the international solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), and we work in Senegal on issues that are important to WLUML, all the issues around women and their religion. We are not Muslim feminists, we are feminists, period. Since religion plays an important role in women's lives, so we work on religion. But we work on several other issues, like the new trends in women's migration, we also work on violence against women and the role of religion in violence against women. And these past years, we worked a lot on empowering women to become candidates for elections and also to vote... In the rural areas of Senegal, very often girls don't have birth certificates. If a person does not have a birth certificate, this person has a lot of problems in being registered at school, passing exams, voting or being voted for, so we did a lot of work in rural areas to support women to be registered so that they become full citizens. Without that, you are not a full citizen in Senegal. We have also been working on women's access to land.

CP: How was GREFELS formed? What was the impetus for its formation?

CB: Fatou Sow, me and some other friends, we were involved in WLUML-AME (Women Living Under Muslim Laws – Africa and the Middle East). It was in the mid-1990s and Ayesha (Imam) was in charge of WLUML-AME. Ayesha had raised some money for us before it was time for her to leave Senegal and go back home. She wanted to leave the money to us but we were not organised in a formal structure. In Senegal, it is possible to have official activities without being registered at the ministry of interior. When we got that money and spent it, then we found out that it was easier to work and it was also easier to reach more women and to be involved in women’s movements when you do this in a formal manner. So, we decided that we would become an officially registered organisation. I think that we did that in 1999.

CP: How did GREFELS get involved in organising around women’s access to land?

CB: In Senegal, it is not just the feminist movement that is involved in women gaining access to land. We have a lot of other organisations, like *ENDA Tiers Monde* (an environment and alternative development NGO), that work on the issue. The female lawyers’ organisation also works on this. Access to land is an issue even at the level of the state. I remember that when we were preparing for the Beijing conference, the minister for women’s promotion, who was a feminist, was really involved in the struggle for women to get access to land. So, it is not a recent issue. But for GREFELS, it is again through Women Living Under Muslim Laws that we got more involved in this question. We did research to learn more about the obstacles, why women cannot gain access to land. And one of the findings is that we have a law that was passed in the early 1960s. At that time, our government labelled itself as socialist, and this law, which is still ongoing, says that “the land belongs to the state”.

CP: It’s the same in Nigeria.

CB: If the land belongs to the state, this means that any citizen, regardless of class, gender, whatever, can get access to land. But because of tradition or religion... women cannot access land, and also there are a lot of ideological constructions around owning land. A woman who claims land shames her family, either her father or her husband. It means that she needs something, it means that the family is not able to see to that. Women mobilised on that, and they were able to get land but this land was very far away, difficult to cultivate and very far from the main road, where they cannot have access to

water. So, we had all these kinds of issues and it is still the same situation. We also have a law on decentralisation.

CP: What does the law say in Senegal?

CB: The law says that issues that are important to the population at the local level – land, health – should be dealt with at the local level by local councils. So now the problem is that women are not in the local council, and this is why it was so important for women to get the law on parity, so that, even if they are not promoted by their party, by law, the party is obliged to put them on the list.

CP: So how did this law come about – the law on parity?

CB: This law was passed in 2010, I think, by our former head of state, Abdoulaye Wade. And this also is not a new thing, because Senegalese women got the right to vote in 1945. In the four main cities in Senegal, people were considered French citizens. In France, women got the right to vote, I think it was in 1944. As a consequence, French Senegalese women also got the same rights and it was very important because women were not elected but they played an important role in the Senegalese Socialist Party (the ruling party at that time, led by Senegalese) being voted for and then passing laws that were favourable to Senegalese people, especially to Senegalese women.

The colonial policy was that some Senegalese were considered French citizens, and Senegalese in rural areas were considered French subjects. So, we had two classes of Senegalese: those living in large cities like Dakar, Gorée, Saint-Louis and Rufisque were French citizens and had exactly the same rights as the French in France. But Senegalese who lived in rural areas were not citizens. And women in the rural areas were not allowed to vote. So, it was only after independence that a woman from the rural areas became the first member of parliament; it was in 1963. Even before that, women were in the political arena but were there to cheer the male leaders or to be in the campaign, but they were not themselves considered fit to become candidates and to be members of parliament or to be candidates for presidential election.

CP: Going back to the law on parity, the forces pushing for that law: were they primarily women's movements or was it the Senegalese Socialist Party, or did they come together at some point?

CB: The law, really, is the outcome of women's struggles. But in Senegal, at least, we cannot separate politics from other women's struggles, including the right to education. Both go together. Women couldn't get positive laws

passed without laws on health, for example, reproductive health. I think the Senegalese women's movement and the feminist women are very well aware that you cannot walk on one leg, that some needed to work on legal issues, some needed to focus their struggle on economic issues, others on health issues. And then also there were several networks on women's health, reproductive health, and a network on legal issues... The Penal Code is now being reformed, so there is a mobilisation of women lawyers on several issues related to abortion. The women lawyers carried out studies that showed that about 99% of women who are in custody are there for abortion or because they killed their baby. If abortion becomes free, it means women will not be obliged to commit infanticide. If women have access to family planning and abortion, this means that women won't be in custody anymore. It also means that women will control their bodies and this will have an impact on their economic wellbeing... which will help to change power relations within the family. It is the way I believe that people work here. I'm sure if you ask women lawyers, they will say, "We are not feminists", but the outcome of their struggles will be women's empowerment.

CP: You've raised the very interesting issue of how the Senegalese women's movement and feminist movement work together on these various issues and see them as interconnected. Are there some issues where the feminist movement differs from the position taken by women's movements in Senegal?

CB: I would say that they don't differ, but feminists are forward, the feminist thinking is ahead. What the feminist movement looks for is the power relations, how to change the power relations, and we don't despise very, very, very small outcomes. Even if it is very small, we believe that it changes power relations.

I just want to give you one example that happened when I was doing some training in rural areas on violence against women. The training was about the law (we also have a law on violence against women) and we were defining what violence against women means. Women participating in the training gave their own definitions and then some of them said, "I am not happy with all the definitions we are hearing". And then I said, let me give you the United Nations definition that is in the [Beijing] Declaration, so I wrote down the definition and one woman said, "I am not happy with this definition either". She said that in her village, a guy was married to a young woman who was giving birth... Because of the lack of health facilities, that young woman who

was in labour was transferred to the city to give birth, but unfortunately, she and the baby died. Five days later, the husband took another wife. So, women decided that not only was this violence against the deceased wife, but they were just outraged, and so they banned the guy from the village. They told him, “You are definitely banned from the village, you are not allowed to come back”. This happened in early 2016, and the guy never came back again to the village, and his family and his relatives live in the village. To me, living in Senegal, knowing how strong all the family ties, the community ties, are, I see these women have been so bold as to ban a man from a village! This means that they feel that they are powerful enough to do this kind of thing. This kind of story I keep on hearing everywhere I go in Senegal, so to me this is very important.

Even on parity, there are a lot of stories, not like that one, but I mean citizen stories, women who go up to the Supreme Court to push for their rights as citizens. To me, these are the feminists. But these women who go to the Supreme Court, who rallied, who petitioned, who advocated, I am sure they won't consider themselves as feminists but what they have been doing is really changing a lot in Senegal.

CP: It's inspiring. You mentioned a law on violence against women, Codou. Can you just give me some background to that?

CB: This law was voted in January 1990, and is also the outcome of women mobilising. In 1987, during Ramadan, a man who belonged to a very powerful religious family was not fasting, and he ordered his wife to cook a meal for him and his friends. His wife, a very young woman, said, “No”, and the guy beat her and killed her. So, women were really outraged. It was a national movement, everywhere, holding rallies and then they went to court. It was not the family of the woman who went to the court, it was women from other organisations who went to court. But it was the first time, so there were steps that we didn't know you have to take if the charge was murder. So, there was no autopsy, there were a lot of things... We didn't have any material proof, but the guy was detained for three months. And even this was really a big victory because he was from a very prominent religious family and he was tried and found not guilty. And then another case appeared, another woman who was beaten... There was a lot of family violence, violence from partners, a lot of rape and also female genital mutilation. It was after Beijing, and here in Senegal, we really prepared for Beijing and, as I was telling you, the minister

for women's promotion was a feminist. So, because of this context, the law was passed, and at that time it was really, I believe, the most advanced law on violence against women. It has a very interesting definition of violence, and also the sentences are very strong, like if there is rape, the sentence is ten years. If it involves a girl below 13, then the fine and everything is doubled. The law has only been really enforced for about five years. It is less enforced now and the sentence depends on how the judge sees women's rights to physical integrity.

CP: When was it passed?

CB: 1990.

CP: How long did it take to get it passed?

CB: Maybe two years, because there was a lot of debate in the parliament, a lot of men who did not agree. But you know, it was just outrageous, so we got the law passed.

CP: And how does it define violence against women?

CB: I think it is the same definition as in the Beijing Plan of Action. A lot of laws that were passed at that time... the sources were the Beijing Plan of Action. It is also the landmark of the Senegalese women's movement. You know, after Beijing, all the Senegalese feminists who attended the conference were summoned by the minister for women's promotion, in order to help in the drafting of a national plan of action for the promotion of Senegalese women. And we drafted a plan of action – the definitions were feminist, the procedure, the steps to reach the outcome, the expected outcome – all these were feminist. But we had elections and a change of regime. This National Plan of Action was then forgotten and never implemented.

Now that the Penal Code is being reformed, the Women Lawyers' Association wants it to encompass a broader definition of violence against women, so that marital rape is included, for example. Marital rape is not included in the existing law on violence against women. So, we hope that the association of women lawyers will continue, because some of them sit on the committee that is working on the reform of the Penal Code. The Association also works with other women's and human rights organisations.

CP: Can you give us the name of that organisation?

CB: Yes, it is *L'Association des Femmes Juristes du Senegal* (Women Lawyers' Association of Senegal).

In the 1990s, the Senegalese government said that it wanted to be trained in gender, what gender means, how to implement a gender policy. So, everybody, except the head of state, was trained in gender mainstreaming.

CP: What informed that? Was it the minister for women's promotion who you said was a feminist?

CB: I am not sure whether it was the minister or maybe it was just the context. And you know Senegal always wants to appear as the first in a lot of things... but they do not really want to make changes. Also at that time, we had a new representative at the World Bank in Senegal; his wife was a Senegalese woman and she was a feminist. So, I think she pressed the World Bank to give funding to a lot of women's issues. Or to force the government to include gender in their policies.

CP: Going back to the Penal Code reform that you mentioned earlier, Codou, who is behind that? What is informing the reform of the Penal Code?

CB: Most articles in our Penal Code are taken from the French penal codes. I don't know how it works in English-speaking countries but in most French-speaking countries, most laws come from the French law that we inherited after independence.

CP: It's very similar in Nigeria.

CB: So, there were a few reforms but now... it really needs to be reformed.

CP: But is it that women are pushing for this, or is it within government that they decided to reform?

CB: No, it is the civil society, the government. It is a national demand for change.

CP: You mentioned earlier how, despite the existence of a law on parity, women who put themselves forward as candidates still face a host of obstacles. Can you say a bit more about that?

CB: When the law was voted, several women's organisations, including GREFELS, did a lot of training in order to enable women to become candidates, so that if they are voted for, they're able to understand what politics means, what a gendered budget means, how to answer to women's needs. In the majority of municipalities, the elected council refused to enforce the law. Although the parties enforced the law, so that when the first on the list is a man, the second should be a woman, or if the first on the list is a woman, next should be a man. You won't believe it, it is now our actual minister of women's promotion who is the most against parity.

CP: Why is that?

CB: She is a mayor in a very big city, Kaolack, and up to now, parity is not enforced there. The mayor decided that she won't enforce it. So, in that city, the elected women filed complaints and they went to the Magistrate's Court. We had two interesting cases. In Kaolack, the court ruled in favour of the ministry of women, which means that parity is not enforced. But in Dakar, parity was enforced; here also, the councillor had refused to enforce parity. Elected women, in Kaolack and in Dakar, went to the Supreme Court. During all that period, before and after the election, and even when these elected women went to the court, the women's movement and the human rights movement supported them a lot. And a committee was created, for parity and the republic. So, it is not just the issue of parity, it is also the issue of citizenship, women being full citizens, period. GREFELS is a member of that committee. So, when women went to the Supreme Court, they organised a very big rally everywhere in Senegal. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the elected women in Dakar. If there is a ruling by the Supreme Court, it applies to the whole country, so this means that everywhere in Senegal, parity should apply. Yet to date, we still have some councils where parity is not applied.

But what is very interesting is that the women who went to the Supreme Court, they were not highly educated women, not the divas of the women's movement but very, very committed young women. They said, "It is our right to sit in the council, we have been voted by the population so we are going to sit, no matter what happens". And now, in that same city, where the mayor is a woman and is against parity, these young elected female councillors are still very mobilised because the council needs to be renewed for new members to come in.

If this group of women draft a declaration or any paper, they send it to us, in GREFELS, and we read it and we correct or give more substance and then we send it to the Women Lawyers' Association who put in the laws, international agreements, all the instruments signed by Senegal. And we also inform the elected women that if Senegal does not respect its own law, "you can take Senegal to the African Union Court of Human Rights and then you can go to the [UN] CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] Committee". They know that they can do that, they can report and they are ready to report anyway. This is what I find very interesting. They're in secondary cities so most of them are unknown in Dakar. These young

women belong to women's organisations, and, at the same time, they belong to political parties. What I find very smart of them is that they know that they might not be supported by their party, but they will be supported by the women's movement. So they expect that support from the women's movement and from each category in the women's movement there are things they ask for. For example, they would ask GREFELS to do the writing or research – because they know that we do research. They would ask the lawyers for the laws, for women's rights instruments. But they might ask something else, because there are so many women's networks on so many issues. So, depending on what they want, if they want a national movement... if they organise a rally, they could ask a women's movement that is in the south of Senegal. You know that we have a rebellion in the south of the country, and there is a women's movement in the south against violence against women in the civil war.

CP: Can you say a few words about that rebellion? To put it in context.

CB: In 1980, a group of men and women stood up in Casamance and demanded independence from Senegal. They rallied and the army shot and killed many among them. This is how the civil war started. But the majority of people in Casamance don't want independence. As is the case with most civil wars, women are those who feel the greatest impact, because they are victims of all forms of violence. In this part of Senegal, women are very active, they are in the field; this is the region of Senegal where rice is produced and women are rice producers... These are the most democratic societies in Senegal, so to speak. Women in this region are quite powerful, but because they have been so deeply affected by the conflict, for several years they have been organising to put an end to the conflict, to get their fields back, to be free from violence.

So, to come back to the elected women councillors: if they ask women in Casamance to be part of the movement, to organise a rally for the law on parity to be enforced, women in Casamance would rally for them.

CP: What are GREFELS' plans for the future?

CB: You know, the problem we have with GREFELS is that, although we worked a lot on migration, it's very difficult to get funding from Europe, they don't trust women's organisations. And the other challenge is to get young feminist researchers who are very committed, who would accept to do voluntary jobs. It is very difficult to find that and it is difficult for me now to work in rural areas because it is really hard, the living conditions are quite difficult.

CP: I am wondering whether working on a voluntary basis means unpaid or working in a non-governmental organisation.

CB: It means unpaid.

CP: Do people do research unpaid?

CB: The first research to be done in Senegal on violence against women was by GREFELS and it was not paid. I do training in rural areas, I am not paid for that, it is my contribution. But I understand the young women who don't do that because they have a lot of responsibilities and they don't have jobs, they really need money. So, if you cannot pay them, maybe it is more rewarding for them to work with other organisations.

If there is a need for training, a lot of grassroots groups know that they can call on GREFELS. And if we can make the training, we just go. I go with local transportation and when I am in the village or in the city, then I live with the people and, really, I don't have to pay for anything. And since I am going to retire anyway, I don't need to be paid for that. It is the same for a lot of colleagues who do a lot of voluntary work. I believe that everywhere in Africa, women do that.

CP: That depends a lot on the issues as well, maybe on violence against women you are more likely to get women doing that.

CB: Yeah, I'm sure, I agree with you. But you know... I would love to see some transformation before I die. Like what I was telling you about those women who banned that guy from the village, it feels so good when you hear this kind of story, and there are so many.

CP: When you say there are so many stories, is GREFELS documenting them?

CB: There is a very interesting women's organisation in Kaolack: the name is APROFES, which stands for the Association for the Promotion of Senegalese Women. It was established in 1987, and it is from their struggles that a lot of laws in favour of women were passed. GREFELS is on their board. They have been doing a lot of important things, like working on the environment, access to land, violence against women, housing, and they are feminists. So, what we have in mind is that we would document their experience and also document GREFELS' contribution to their work.

They do something that has caught our attention, which is training the youth. When I talk about youth, I mean youth who are 15 years or sometimes younger, and they train both girls and boys. And on this I have one story, for example. I did the training for girls and boys on violence against girls in

schools. At the end of the training, the boys made this commitment: they decided that every day, two or three boys would stand in front of the toilets to make sure that no girl shall be molested. The toilets are far from the classes and when girls go to the toilet, anybody can step inside and can rape them. So the boys would stand outside, or sometimes they would accompany the girls of their neighbourhood. Every day when they go to school, they make this kind of commitment.

CP: That's really good.

CB: Yeah, so it is important that this kind of work is done. And we hope that we will be able to document it.

CP: Finally, Codou, what lessons would you draw from the experiences you've had and from the varied experiences of women mobilising in struggles in Senegal?

CB: I am very positive because I think that 10 years or 15 years ago, I wouldn't believe what is happening now. That, as I told you, young women who are not highly educated, who stand up for their rights and even if their parents or husbands ask them to leave the matter – “You know it's not a big deal, if you are not a council member, that does not matter” – and these women say, “It is my right”. And also, women going to court. But the obstacles that were against the women's movements ten years ago, most of those obstacles are still here, including the lack of political will from the policy makers who still use women as tokens. It means that those women must be very aware of male politics. They also must learn how to strengthen themselves without dreaming that all women are “nice”, that they will support us because we are women.

I was telling you that Senegal is a strange country, we never demanded that our country should sign any international or regional instrument. We are among the first to sign anything. We have so many very good laws, but they are not enforced. But I believe also that it depends on the head of state. Wade was elected in March, 2000. He loves to make the kind of statement that he is the best and he will be the best. On the 8 March 2000, women went to talk to him. We went on a march but it was not to fight against anything; we wanted to talk to him, to tell him about the changes we wanted to happen. So, we went to the *Palais de la République*, and he came out and we presented our papers. And he started to tell us about when he was a student, he was in love with three very prominent Senegalese women. So, Wade was there, in March, with all the TV cameras on him, telling us about his love affairs. It was quite

funny. But behind this, it is real that women struggled a lot, they struggled a lot, a lot, a lot. On violence against women, female genital mutilation, all these things. And I believe that there is another thing: civil society and human rights organisations are quite strong in Senegal, so women are not alone when they fight. The first time a woman was killed by her husband and the women were demonstrating, it is our actual minister of justice who was in the forefront. At that time, he was a human rights and women's human rights defender. Sometimes, when it is really difficult, women would go to religious leaders and they could get the support from religious leaders, if they're able to argue on religious grounds, if they can say that Islam gives us this right or this other right and the authorities don't want to enforce it. But then we have the problem that we don't want our issue to be resolved on a religious basis. So that's the other challenge that is very important in Senegal now.

CP: So, there are quite a few areas where navigating the waters is not easy.

CB: Exactly.

CP: Codou, let me thank you once again, it has been very interesting. Thanks so much.

