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**Title: From “Mara Sakit” to political marginalization: understanding barriers to women’s leadership in Chad.**

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## Abstract

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In Chad, the expression “Mara sakit” meaning “just a woman, nothing more and nothing important”, reflects a deeply entrenched social perception that continues to shape women's lives and opportunities. Far from being a simple expression, it symbolizes the persistent gender inequalities that fuel exclusion, discrimination, violence, and injustice across both private and public spheres. These realities significantly limit women's access to leadership and decision-making positions, particularly within the political realms. This paper uses the concept of “Mara sakit” as an analytical lens to examine how deeply entrenched gender stereotypes shape women’s political participation in Chad and to explore the broader implications of these dynamics for democratic governance, gender equality, and inclusive development.

This paper contributes to feminist political theory by expanding the concept of political participation beyond electoral representation to include discursive and epistemic dimensions of exclusion. It argues that women’s political exclusion in Chad extends beyond formal political institutions and is reflected in the marginalization of women’s voices, experiences, and expertise within public and policy-making spaces.

Despite growing commitments to gender equality and recent gains in parliamentary representation, women’s participation in political discourse and knowledge production remains limited. The study highlights persistent barriers that restrict women’s leadership opportunities, particularly for rural, economically marginalized, and younger women who face intersecting forms of exclusion.

The findings identify structural, socio-cultural, and economic obstacles. Political parties act as key gatekeepers through informal candidate selection processes dominated by patronage networks that disadvantage women. Similar patterns of exclusion are reproduced in media spaces, policy debates, and academic institutions, limiting women’s visibility and influence.

These barriers are reinforced by patriarchal socio-cultural norms that continue to associate political leadership with masculine and, often, militarized forms of power. Women who enter politics frequently face social stigma, family and community pressures, moral scrutiny, and reputational attacks. Traditional authorities, religious narratives, and gendered expectations surrounding care responsibilities further constrain women’s participation and leadership.

Economic constraints remain a major barrier to women’s political participation in Chad. The high cost of political engagement reinforces existing gender inequalities in access to campaign financing, credit, and productive assets, limiting women’s ability to compete effectively in elections. These disparities also restrict access to education, research opportunities, and professional networks that facilitate influence in policy-making processes.

Political instability and insecurity further compound these challenges. Electoral violence, intimidation, and the militarization of political competition create hostile environments that disproportionately discourage women’s candidacy and active participation in public life.

It is within this Chadian context, informed by contemporary feminist perspectives, that this paper examines the barriers to women’s leadership while exploring transformative pathways for political empowerment and gender equality. It argues that achieving meaningful inclusion requires not only electoral reforms but also broader transformations of media systems, knowledge institutions, and public discourse structures.

**Keywords: Mara sakit, Women’s leadership, political participation, Chad.**

## **Introduction**

Women's political representation has become a central benchmark of democratic progress, global development and governance debates. In many African countries, including Chad, efforts to increase women's representation in political institutions have resulted in measurable numerical gains. However, this paper argues that focusing on representation alone provides an incomplete and often misleading picture of women's political power.

In Chad, despite increases in women's parliamentary representation, women remain systematically excluded from the spaces where political meaning is produced, debated, and legitimized. Political power is not only exercised through formal institutions but also through control over public discourse and knowledge production. This paper therefore argues that women's political exclusion must be understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that operates across three interrelated domains: electoral, discursive, and epistemic.

The central argument of this paper is that gender equality in politics cannot be achieved without addressing exclusion across all three dimensions. This paper therefore moves beyond representation to examine women's political participation

Furthermore, the paper does not merely describe the various barriers that hinder the expression of women's leadership, particularly their political participation. It also examines the consequences of these barriers while proposing feminist and transformative solutions aimed at ensuring meaningful and substantive political participation for women.

## **I. Theoretical Framework**

This paper draws on feminist institutionalism, which argues that political institutions are not gender-neutral but are shaped by historical and informal power mechanisms. Institutions reproduce gender inequality through both formal rules and informal practices. However, while feminist institutionalism provides strong tools for analyzing electoral exclusion, it is less developed in explaining exclusion from discourse and knowledge production.

To address this gap, this paper develops an expanded analytical framework of political participation. This framework conceptualizes political participation as operating across three hierarchically interconnected levels:

- Electoral participation which refers to access to formal political office
- Discursive participation which refers to participation in public political debate, including media and public forums
- Epistemic participation which refers to participation in the production of political knowledge, including academic research and policy expertise.

The paper further introduces the concept of layered gendered exclusion, which describes how women may be included at one level while being excluded at deeper levels of political power. This framework builds on intersectionality theory, which highlights how gender interacts with class, geography, and education to produce differentiated forms of exclusion.

Drawing on a feminist theoretical framework, this paper analyzes and presents the structural, socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that constrain women's political participation in Chad. This approach allows not only to understand how these barriers manifest themselves and shape women's political participation, but it also helps to advance reflections on how they can be challenged, transformed, or dismantled in order to foster the effective and meaningful expression of women's leadership.

## **II. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative critical case study design focusing on Chad. It draws on secondary data include:

- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) gender representation data
- UN Women reports on political participation
- African Union gender and governance frameworks
- Peer-reviewed feminist political science literature
- Secondary qualitative analyses of Chad's political system

Chad is used as a critical case to explore how formal inclusion can coexist with deep structural exclusion across multiple dimensions of political life.

## **III. Political Context in Chad: history focus and militarization**

Understanding women's political exclusion in Chad requires situating it within the broader historical and political context of state formation.

Following independence, successive political regimes in Chad were often short-lived and primarily concerned with managing internal conflicts and consolidating power. In this context of recurring political violence, instability, and authoritarian governance, women remained largely excluded from political life. Their social roles were predominantly confined to domestic responsibilities, while political decision-making remained overwhelmingly male-dominated. The prolonged cycles of conflict and insecurity further reinforced women's marginalization from political participation and leadership.

The democratization processes that swept across much of Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s, however, marked an important turning point. In Chad, the introduction of multiparty politics created new opportunities for civic engagement and political mobilization. Women increasingly entered the public sphere through civil society organizations, women's associations, trade unions, and political parties. This period witnessed the emergence of women as political actors after decades of being relegated to the status of second-class citizens and largely excluded from public decision-making.

The institutionalization of political pluralism provided women with greater opportunities to engage in political activities and advocate for their interests. Nevertheless, their participation remained constrained by deeply entrenched structural barriers. Although Bourkou Louise Kabo<sup>1</sup> became Chad's first female parliamentarian in 1962, women's efforts to enter and influence the political arena continued to face significant resistance.

Political instability, including the coups d'état and civil conflicts that marked the country's history, particularly during the late 1970s and early 1980s<sup>2</sup>, created an environment that was largely unfavorable to women's political inclusion. Political power became increasingly concentrated within military and security structures, spheres that were almost exclusively controlled by men.

Consequently, women remained largely excluded from political negotiations, decision-making processes, and power-sharing arrangements, even as they continued to contribute to the public administration and the private sector.

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<sup>1</sup> M. N'gangbet, *Peut-on encore sauver le Tchad*, Paris, Karthala, 1984, p 12.

<sup>2</sup> R. Buijtenhuijs, *Le FROLINAT et les guerres civiles au Tchad (1977-1984)*, Paris, Karthala, 1997, p.47.

A significant milestone was reached in 1982 when Fatimé Kimto<sup>3</sup> became the first woman appointed to government as Secretary of State for Labor and the Advancement of Women. She later served as Minister of Social Affairs and the Advancement of Women in 1984. Her appointment represented an important breakthrough for women's political representation in Chad, although it did not fundamentally transform the gendered structures that continued to shape access to political power.

This historical trajectory illustrates how the militarization of political authority, combined with patriarchal social norms, contributed to the systematic exclusion of women from leadership positions. It also helps explain why contemporary efforts to increase women's political representation continue to face resistance despite formal commitments to gender equality and democratic inclusion.

#### **IV. Barriers to Women's Political Participation**

Women's exclusion from political participation in Chad is produced through a complex system of interlocking barriers that operate simultaneously at institutional, socio-cultural, symbolic, and economic levels. These barriers do not function independently; rather, they reinforce one another to structure a political environment in which women's access to leadership is systematically constrained, both in formal political institutions and in broader spaces of public life.

The analysis of these barriers is situated within a broader understanding of political participation that extends beyond the electoral sphere to include both discursive and epistemic dimensions. These three dimensions electoral, discursive, and epistemic participation are deeply interconnected and collectively shape women's ability to influence political processes, public debates, and policy outcomes.

##### **a) Structural barriers**

**“Mara Sakit: Politics is a jungle, and you do not have the muscles needed to survive in it. Even if you are among us, you should stay behind us and, above all, never act as though you are entitled to lead.”**

As of 2026, women's political participation in Chad has witnessed gradual progress, particularly as a result of legal reforms promoting gender parity. Following the 2024 legislative elections, women secured approximately 33.5% of seats in the National Assembly, representing 63 out of 188 members of parliament<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the Senate currently includes 19 women out of 69 senators<sup>5</sup>, while the government formed in April 2026 comprises 12 women among its 37 members<sup>6</sup>. At first glance, these figures suggest a significant improvement in women's institutional and political representation.

These developments constitute an important historical milestone in a country where women's presence within political institutions was long marginal. However, such gains remain relatively recent and fragile and do not yet reflect women's full and effective participation in political life. Young women, in particular, continue to be significantly underrepresented in decision-making spaces, political parties, and local governance structures. From a broader perspective, women

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<sup>3</sup> Ngartebaye Le-yota, « La participation des femmes », p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Parline, Union Interparlementaire, Tchad - Assemblée Nationale, disponible à l'adresse <https://data.ipu.org/fr/parliament/TD/TD-LC01/administration/administration/>

<sup>5</sup> Sénateurs de la République Tchad, disponible à l'adresse <https://senat.td/index.php/les-senateurs/>

<sup>6</sup> Manara radio et télévision, un gouvernement de 37 membres avec 11 nouveaux visages et 12 femmes Gouvernement de 2025, disponible à l'adresse <https://manara.td/brouillon-autotchad-un-gouvernement-de-37-membres-avec-11-nouveaux-visages-et-12-femmes/>

remain a minority within positions of political authority and public influence, and genuine parity in political decision-making remains far from being achieved.

Thus, the observed increase in women's representation reflects a process of managed inclusion called "tokenism" rather than a deeper structural transformation of political power. Despite constituting more than half of the population<sup>7</sup> and playing an increasingly active role in social, economic, and civic life, women continue to be underrepresented and often invisible within political decision-making arenas and spaces of public political expression. Their political legitimacy is frequently questioned, and their participation remains constrained by persistent structural, socio-cultural, economic, and symbolic barriers.

The central observations emerging from this analysis are:

- Political parties function as gatekeepers of access to political office, and candidate selection processes remain highly informal and dominated by patronage networks. Women's inclusion is therefore often dependent on elite sponsorship rather than autonomous political mobilization. Even when women are elected, they are frequently assigned to positions with limited influence over decision-making processes.
- The leadership structures of political parties remain overwhelmingly dominated by male elites. While women are often numerous at the grassroots level and actively involved in mobilization and party activities, they rarely occupy key leadership positions such as party president or secretary-general. Instead, they are frequently relegated to secondary roles that carry limited strategic influence and decision-making authority. Although Chad's political landscape included more than 336 officially registered political parties in 2025<sup>8</sup>, only two of these parties were headed by women. Among them, Lydie Beassemnda was the sole female candidate in the 2024 presidential election. This stark disparity illustrates the persistent barriers that prevent women from accessing the highest levels of political leadership, despite their growing presence within political organizations. Moreover, women who do succeed in reaching senior political positions often operate within environments characterized by deeply entrenched patriarchal power relations that constrain their autonomy, influence, and capacity to drive transformative change. Their leadership is frequently scrutinized, challenged, or limited by informal institutional norms and gendered expectations that continue to privilege male authority. In some cases, these constraints lead women leaders to reproduce or reinforce existing political practices and power structures rather than challenge them. This is often less a matter of personal choice than a consequence of limited institutional support, inadequate leadership training, restricted access to political networks, and narrow margins for independent action within male-dominated political systems.
- Executive positions including ministerial portfolios, governorships, and mayoral offices remain overwhelmingly masculinized. This pattern is equally evident at the local and community levels, where elected positions and traditional leadership structures, including canton and village chiefdoms, continue to be dominated by men. Women's representation within these local governance and customary institutions remains almost non-existent. For example, across the entire Chadian territory, there is only one female canton chief. This striking underrepresentation highlights the persistence of gendered barriers to leadership within both formal and informal political structures. At the executive and administrative levels, women also remain significantly underrepresented in senior positions such as

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<sup>7</sup> Women2030, p. 1, disponible à l'adresse <https://www.women2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Chad-3.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Tchad Infos, 336 partis politiques au Tchad : pléthore ou signe de vitalité démocratique ?  
<https://www.facebook.com/tchadinfos/videos/micro-le-tchad-compte-336-partis-politiques-selon-un-communiqu%C3%A9-du-minist%C3%A8re-de-/1075490631388720/>

governors, prefects, and territorial administrators, where critical decisions regarding local governance and public policy are made. As a result, women continue to have limited influence over political processes and decision-making mechanisms that directly affect communities and local development. The exclusion of women from these positions is particularly significant because local governance institutions often constitute the primary interface between citizens and the state. Their absence from these spaces not only restricts women's political influence but also limits the incorporation of women's perspectives and priorities into local governance and development agendas.

- A key addition in this paper is the concept of tokenism, defined as the symbolic inclusion of women in political spaces without substantive redistribution of power. Tokenism operates as a mechanism that stabilizes patriarchal systems by projecting an image of inclusion while maintaining elite male dominance. In Chad, tokenism interacts with militarized patriarchy, producing a system where women's inclusion is often performative, strategic, and politically instrumental rather than transformative. This Tokenism functions as a buffer mechanism, allowing political systems to signal inclusion to international actors, maintain elite male control internally and reduce pressure for structural reform. Thus, tokenism is not accidental it is structural and functional within militarized patriarchal systems. In recent years, women's inclusion in formal institutions has increased, but this inclusion often reflects tokenistic political strategies, including symbolic appointments to ministries with limited budgets or influence, limited representation in high-security or economic portfolios and reliance on elite patronage rather than grassroots political mobilization. This reflects what can be described as discursive tokenism, where women are visible but not treated as authoritative political actors. Political parties function as gatekeepers, and candidate selection is largely informal. As a result, women's inclusion often depends on elite sponsorship rather than autonomous political mobilization. This produces a form of electoral tokenism, where women are included to satisfy quotas or external expectations but remain excluded from influential decision-making roles.
- To date, there is no comprehensive database or official record documenting the total number of female political scientists, researchers, or academic scholars in political science in Chad. More broadly, educational attainment and literacy levels continue to pose significant challenges to the emergence of a critical mass of female experts in specialized fields, including political science, public policy, and governance studies. These structural educational barriers contribute to women's limited presence within academic and policy-making circles, where political knowledge is produced, debated, and legitimized. As a result, women remain underrepresented among recognized experts, researchers, and commentators on political affairs. Beyond academia, women are also largely absent from political debates and public discussions. Their participation as leading contributors, commentators, moderators, or hosts of political programs remains particularly limited. Political talk shows, policy forums, media debates, and public discussions continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by male voices, reinforcing the perception that political expertise and authority are primarily male attributes. This underrepresentation not only restricts women's visibility in the public sphere but also weakens their ability to shape political narratives, influence public opinion, and contribute to policy debates. Consequently, women face exclusion not only from formal political institutions but also from the discursive and epistemic spaces where political legitimacy and authority are constructed.

## **b) From Socio-cultural norms to delegitimisation**

**“Mara Sakit: Politics is for intelligent people, and clearly you are one of them. But you can at least be useful somewhere else”**

The underrepresentation of women in political leadership cannot be explained solely by institutional or economic constraints. These structural barriers are further reinforced by deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and symbolic mechanisms that shape perceptions of political legitimacy, authority, and expertise. In the Chadian context, politics continues to be widely perceived as an inherently masculine domain, while women are primarily associated with domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and family obligations. Such gendered expectations create significant obstacles to women's participation in public and political life.

Women who aspire to political leadership or seek to engage in political debates often encounter forms of social stigma that question their conformity to socially prescribed gender roles. Their political ambitions are frequently interpreted as incompatible with expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and household responsibilities. As a result, women are often confronted with questions rarely directed at their male counterparts: Who will take care of their children? How will they manage their households? Why would a woman choose politics instead of prioritizing her family? These narratives contribute to the construction of political engagement as a socially risky endeavor for women and discourage many from pursuing leadership roles or studies.

Closely linked to this stigmatization is the persistent presumption of incompetence that affects women in both political and academic spaces. Women's expertise, leadership capacities, and intellectual contributions are often subjected to greater scrutiny and skepticism than those of men. Even when women possess equivalent or superior qualifications, they frequently struggle to be recognized as legitimate political actors or authoritative voices in public debates. Their interventions are more likely to be questioned, minimized, or dismissed, reflecting broader patriarchal assumptions that associate authority, rationality, and leadership with masculinity.

These dynamics are particularly visible within discursive spaces where political ideas are debated and public opinion is shaped. Women remain significantly underrepresented as commentators, analysts, moderators, and key participants in political discussions, whether in traditional media, public forums, or digital platforms. Political debates continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by male voices, reinforcing the perception that political expertise belongs primarily to men. Consequently, women are denied equal opportunities to influence public narratives, frame political priorities, and shape collective understandings of governance and development.

Beyond discursive exclusion lies a deeper form of marginalization that can be understood as epistemic exclusion. Women remain significantly underrepresented within universities, research institutions, think tanks, policy advisory bodies, and other sites of knowledge production. Their limited presence in these spaces constrains their ability to contribute to the generation, validation, and dissemination of political knowledge. As a result, women are often excluded not only from political decision-making but also from the processes through which political realities are interpreted and understood.

This epistemic marginalization has far-reaching consequences. It restricts women's ability to define policy problems, shape development narratives, influence governance frameworks, and contribute to the formulation of public policies. The absence of women's perspectives from knowledge-producing institutions means that political agendas and development priorities continue to be largely framed through male-dominated lenses. In this sense, exclusion operates not only through



the denial of access to political office but also through the denial of authority as producers of knowledge and expertise.

The cumulative effect of these socio-cultural, symbolic, discursive, and epistemic barriers is the production of what this paper conceptualizes as a system of layered gendered exclusion. Women may gain access to formal political institutions through quotas or electoral reforms, yet remain marginalized within the broader arenas where political legitimacy, authority, and knowledge are constructed. Consequently, while women may be included in politics as participants, they continue to be excluded from defining what politics is, whose voices matter, and which issues deserve political attention.

Ultimately, the symbolic delegitimization of women's political authority remains one of the most enduring barriers to transformative political leadership. As long as women are perceived as less legitimate political actors, less credible experts, and less authoritative voices in public affairs, formal gains in representation will remain insufficient to achieve substantive gender equality in political life.

### **c) Gendered division of labor and Care Work**

#### **“Mara sakit : what can you possibly do beyond simple household chores”**

Political participation in Chad is highly resource-dependent. Campaigning, visibility, education, and professional advancement require financial resources that many women lack due to structural economic inequalities.

Economic barriers represent one of the most significant yet often underestimated obstacles to women's leadership and political participation. Across many contexts, women continue to experience lower levels of economic autonomy than men, resulting from persistent gender inequalities in access to education, employment opportunities, financial resources, and productive assets. Women are less likely to own land, property, or businesses, have more limited access to formal credit systems and financial institutions, and are disproportionately concentrated in informal, precarious, and low-income sectors. These economic disparities are not accidental or temporary; rather, they are rooted in historically entrenched gendered economic structures that have systematically restricted women's opportunities to accumulate wealth, build financial security, and exercise economic power.

The implications of these inequalities extend far beyond individual economic well-being. Political participation and leadership often require substantial financial resources, whether to pursue higher education, develop professional expertise, build influential networks, engage in civic activities, finance electoral campaigns, or sustain long-term engagement in public life. Women who face economic insecurity are therefore placed at a structural disadvantage long before they enter political or academic arenas. Their ability to compete for leadership positions is constrained not by a lack of competence or ambition, but by unequal access to the material resources that facilitate participation and influence.

Economic exclusion is further reinforced by the gendered distribution of unpaid care and domestic labor. Across societies, women continue to bear primary responsibility for childcare, household management, elder care, and other forms of reproductive labor. Although indispensable to the functioning of families and communities, these activities remain largely invisible, uncompensated, and undervalued within economic and political systems. The significant amount of time devoted to unpaid care work limits women's availability for education, professional advancement, networking opportunities, political engagement, and leadership development.

The interaction between economic inequality and unpaid care responsibilities produces a particularly powerful mechanism of exclusion. Women are not only constrained by limited financial resources but are also deprived of the time necessary to convert existing resources into opportunities for advancement. This dual burden generates a cumulative disadvantage whereby economic dependency reinforces time poverty, and time poverty, in turn, restricts opportunities for economic empowerment. Consequently, women encounter multiple and interconnected barriers that reduce their capacity to invest in leadership trajectories pursue political careers, or access influential decision-making spaces.

These challenges are especially pronounced in contexts characterized by weak social protection systems, limited public care infrastructure, and persistent gender norms that assign domestic responsibilities primarily to women. In such environments, the absence of institutional support mechanisms further intensifies the burden borne by women, making political engagement and leadership aspirations increasingly difficult to sustain. Even highly qualified women often face the dilemma of balancing professional ambitions, family responsibilities, and societal expectations, a challenge that their male counterparts encounter to a much lesser extent.

Viewed through this lens, women's underrepresentation in political and leadership positions cannot be explained solely by institutional barriers or individual choices. Rather, it reflects deeper structural inequalities that shape access to the material, temporal, and social resources required for sustained participation. Political exclusion is therefore inseparable from economic exclusion. The unequal distribution of wealth, access to resources, and responsibility for unpaid labor creates conditions in which women enter leadership pathways from fundamentally unequal starting points. As a result, achieving meaningful gender parity in leadership requires not only institutional reforms but also transformative interventions aimed at addressing the underlying economic and social structures that continue to reproduce women's marginalization.

#### **d) Gender-Based Violence and Hostile Political Environments**

**“Mara Sakit: You are worthless and insignificant. Yet you are the perfect object of entertainment.”**

Gender-based violence constitutes a significant yet frequently overlooked barrier to women's leadership and participation in political and academic spaces. Beyond formal institutional constraints, women who seek positions of influence often encounter hostile environments characterized by various forms of intimidation, harassment, and violence specifically directed at them because of their gender. These experiences not only undermine women's individual well-being and professional advancement but also contribute to broader patterns of exclusion by discouraging women's engagement in public life.

Women active in politics, academia, civil society, and public affairs are disproportionately exposed to multiple forms of gender-based violence. Such violence extends beyond physical aggression and includes psychological abuse, verbal harassment, threats, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and reputational attacks. In many cases, women are targeted not for their ideas, competencies, or political positions, but because they challenge traditional gender norms by occupying spaces that have historically been dominated by men. Their presence in leadership positions is often perceived as a disruption of established power relations, making them particularly vulnerable to backlash and hostility.

One of the most pervasive forms of violence experienced by women leaders is reputational violence. Women in public life are frequently subjected to character attacks, rumours, misinformation campaigns, and public questioning of their morality, competence, or legitimacy.

Unlike their male counterparts, women often face scrutiny that extends beyond their professional qualifications to encompass their appearance, family roles, marital status, or personal lives. Such attacks seek to undermine their credibility, diminish public trust, and weaken their political influence. In many contexts, these tactics are deliberately employed to discourage women from pursuing leadership roles or to force them out of public spaces altogether.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media has further intensified these challenges. While online platforms have created new opportunities for political engagement, advocacy, and visibility, they have also become important sites of gendered violence. Women politicians, academics, journalists, and activists frequently experience online abuse ranging from sexist insults and coordinated harassment campaigns to threats of violence and public humiliation. The speed, anonymity, and reach of digital communication allow such attacks to spread rapidly, exposing women to continuous scrutiny and hostility. Social media therefore functions as a double-edged sword: it enhances visibility and influence while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to gender-based attacks.

The consequences of these experiences extend beyond immediate psychological harm. Persistent exposure to harassment and intimidation often generates fear, stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Many women respond by limiting their public engagement, reducing their visibility, avoiding controversial issues, or withdrawing from leadership opportunities altogether. This phenomenon is commonly described as a “chilling effect”, whereby the anticipation or experience of violence discourages participation and promotes self-censorship. Women may choose not to express political opinions, seek elected office, pursue senior academic positions, or engage in public debates due to concerns for their safety, reputation, or professional future.

Importantly, the impact of gender-based violence is not confined to individual women. It also sends a broader societal message about who belongs in positions of authority and who does not. When women leaders are routinely subjected to harassment, intimidation, and public humiliation, these experiences reinforce perceptions that politics and leadership are inherently masculine domains. Such environments deter not only current leaders but also future generations of women who may view public engagement as excessively risky or socially costly.

In contexts characterized by political instability, weak legal protections, or deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, these dynamics can become even more pronounced. Women may face physical intimidation, threats against family members, restrictions on mobility, and other forms of coercion designed to silence their voices and limit their influence. The absence of effective accountability mechanisms often allows perpetrators to act with impunity, further normalizing violence as a tool of political exclusion.

Consequently, gender-based violence should be understood not merely as a security issue but as a structural mechanism of exclusion that sustains gender inequalities in leadership and decision-making. By creating hostile environments that increase the personal and professional costs of participation, violence operates as a powerful deterrent to women’s political and academic engagement. Addressing women’s underrepresentation in leadership therefore requires not only institutional reforms and increased opportunities for participation but also comprehensive strategies to prevent, sanction, and respond to the diverse forms of violence that continue to restrict women’s access to public life.

## **V. Transformative Feminist Pathways**

**“Mara sakit : this how they see you. Yet despite this, you still exist, and you still have rights as the talented human being you are.”**

Addressing women's political exclusion in Chad requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion or descriptive representation toward a deeper process of structural transformation. While quotas and formal access to political institutions constitute important entry points, they remain insufficient when underlying social, economic, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to shape unequal political opportunity structures. A transformative approach therefore demands coordinated reforms across political, economic, epistemic, media, and legal domains.

Taken together, these reforms highlight the need for a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to women's political inclusion in Chad.

#### **a) Reforming Political Parties and Internal Governance**

Political parties remain central gatekeepers of political participation in Chad, particularly in contexts where electoral competition is heavily mediated through party structures. Structural reform must therefore prioritize internal democratization of political parties, ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent, participatory, and accountable.

This includes the establishment of clear and merit-based procedures for candidate selection, replacing informal negotiations and elite bargaining systems that frequently exclude women. Furthermore, gender quotas must be enforced in a substantive manner, moving beyond symbolic compliance toward measurable representation in leadership positions, electoral lists, and strategic party organs. Without enforcement mechanisms and sanctions for non-compliance, quotas risk becoming procedural formalities rather than instruments of transformation.

In addition, these reforms cannot be fully effective without addressing the persistent militarization of political life, which continues to shape access to power in highly uneven ways. Deconstructing this militarization through civilian oversight and the promotion of non-violent, institutionalized forms of political competition is therefore essential to creating an environment in which women's participation is not only possible but substantively meaningful.

#### **a) Redistribution of Care Work and Social Protection Systems**

In Chad, as in many contexts, women disproportionately carry the burden of childcare, household management, and care for dependent family members. This limits their availability for sustained political engagement and leadership development.

Addressing this imbalance requires investment in public care infrastructure, including accessible and affordable childcare systems that reduce the time constraints faced by women. In parallel, strengthened social protection policies such as maternity support, family allowances, and community-based care services are essential to easing the economic and temporal pressures associated with care responsibilities. However, institutional reforms alone are insufficient without a broader cultural transformation that challenges deeply embedded gender norms assigning care work primarily to women.

#### **b) Media Democratization and Representation**

Media systems play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of leadership and legitimacy. In many contexts, women in politics are either underrepresented or portrayed through gendered stereotypes that reinforce perceptions of incompetence, emotionality, or illegitimacy. In Chad, the media landscape often reflects broader societal inequalities, limiting women's visibility in authoritative and decision-making roles.

Structural change requires increasing women's representation in media leadership positions, editorial boards, and decision-making bodies within both public and private media institutions. Additionally, regulatory frameworks should be strengthened to address gender-based harassment, misinformation, and defamatory discourse in public communication spaces, including traditional and digital media platforms. Such measures are essential to ensuring that media environments contribute to democratic inclusion rather than reinforcing exclusionary narratives.

### **c) Epistemic Inclusion and Knowledge Production**

Chadian women remain underrepresented in research institutions, think tanks, and policy advisory bodies, which limits their ability to shape national and regional development agendas.

To address this gap, targeted funding should be directed toward women-led research initiatives and gender-focused academic institutions. The integration of women scholars and experts into governmental advisory systems is also essential to ensuring that policy formulation reflects diverse experiences and perspectives. Strengthening epistemic inclusion is not merely a matter of representation but of transforming whose knowledge is considered legitimate in shaping public policy.

### **d) Prevention and accountability for Gender-Based Political Violence**

Any meaningful strategy for inclusion must directly confront the pervasive issue of gender-based violence in political and public life. Women in politics and academia are frequently exposed to harassment, intimidation, reputational attacks, and digital violence, all of which undermine their participation and leadership trajectories.

Effective responses require robust legal enforcement mechanisms that ensure accountability for perpetrators of harassment and violence. Digital protection frameworks must be developed to address online abuse, coordinated harassment campaigns, and gendered disinformation. In addition, political institutions including parties and electoral bodies must be held accountable for preventing and sanctioning violence within their structures and among their members. Without such measures, efforts to promote inclusion risk being undermined by persistent environments of fear and intimidation.

## **Conclusion**

Starting from the concept of “Mara sakit”, this paper set out to rethink women's political participation in Chad beyond the narrow language of numerical inclusion. It asked a more fundamental question: what does political participation mean when care, dignity, and recognition are unequally distributed within a system historically structured by exclusion?

The analysis has shown that women's political engagement unfolds within a deeply layered environment where formal rights coexist with persistent structural constraints. Political parties operate as key gatekeepers of access, while socio-economic inequalities, unpaid care burdens, symbolic devaluation, and gendered violence continue to shape who can participate, how, and at what cost. Above these intersecting barriers sits a broader political order marked by militarized patriarchy—one in which authority is historically rooted in coercion, armed networks, and masculinized forms of legitimacy. Within such a system, women's presence in politics is often tolerated, but their power remains constrained by the deeper logics that define political value and authority.

Against this backdrop, feminist perspectives do more than diagnose exclusion; they open pathways for reimagining political life itself. They call for a shift from politics as domination to politics as care, from militarized authority to democratic accountability, and from formal inclusion to substantive transformation. This implies not only institutional reforms within parties and the state, but also a broader epistemic shift that redefines leadership, voice, and legitimacy beyond militarized and patriarchal norms.

Ultimately, the paper argues that women's political participation in Chad cannot be understood or transformed through incremental inclusion alone. It requires a reconfiguration of the very foundations of political order, so that care, equality, and dignity become constitutive principles of democratic governance rather than peripheral aspirations. In this sense, "Mara sakit" is not simply a concept of reflection, but a political horizon: one that points toward a more inclusive and human architecture of power.