

Women's Emancipation in the Western Grasslands of Cameroon, 1975-2010: Inculcating International Conventions

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Abstract— Every 8th March is celebrated in Cameroon as the International Women's day in a bid to galvanise and continue to create awareness, on the strides made by women in so far as women emancipation is concerned worldwide. All these stemmed from without and within as it were international and national obligation to ensure that women should not still be relegated behind in matters of development. Ever since this wave of thought began in the 1940s with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and beyond the women of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon have come a long way but were still to reach their destination as far as full emancipation was concerned. What were the obstacles? Through observatory and statutory data, and manifestations, gender equality was still far-fetched when it came to customary tenets of ethnic groups found in this region. However, International Conferences, National and Non-Governmental Organisations have played greater roles in enhancing the emancipation of women in various domains as examined by this paper in the Western Grasslands of Cameroon. Hence government should come up with more mechanisms with which more enforcement of international and national laws should be upheld to the fullest.

Keywords— Western Grasslands, Women Emancipation, Customary laws.

I. INTRODUCTION

The protection of the rights of vulnerable, especially women and children, has been the preoccupation of African governments and peoples over the years especially when this had to do with obnoxious customs that deprived them of their rights. In Africa, women and children were classified as the main vulnerable groups when it came to human rights violation and discrimination. This discrimination were made possible because most communities were and are still patriarchal. That is, they were founded by men and consequently these men laid down rules and laws which undermined women, like was the case in this study area. These laws were being viewed today as discriminatory and impacting negatively on women. More so, most founders of religions, which formed the norms that regulate human relations, traced their origin to males. That is why in most ethnic religions and even

religions that became global, segregation and discrimination against women were still found in their beliefs and doctrines.¹ Women therefore suffered from violations of varied forms for several reasons. In this study area this type of situation prevailed even when much was thought to have been done to remedy the situation of women. These human rights laws thus helped to liberate women whose customs and traditions relegated them behind.

Most women were not given the opportunity to participate in decision making process in almost all societies in the world, even in issues that concerned them directly. This was because leadership was exclusively preserved by men. This was not only at the community level, but also at the domestic level, since in the homes decision-making, was hardly the joint business of the husband and wife most

¹ A. A. Samah, *Nation Building, Government, Politics, Human Rights and Gender, for Institutions of Higher Learning in*

Cameroon, Wisdom House Production, Yaounde, Cameroon. p.133.

relevant in the study area.² This was due to ignorance, but at times at the detriment of women and the entire family. When women became aware of their rights they started fighting against those customs and traditions that brought but misery to them. Away from leadership, women suffered and some are still suffering from unemployment. The question of working and earning something for the betterment of the family was more or less a man's responsibility and women were to stay at home while men went out to look for whatever in quotes for the survival of the family. Some women were therefore forcefully kept at home even if they had the potentials to work and augment the living standards of their families by ignorant men in the name of pride and gender roles laid down by their customs.³ Many men in the Western Grasslands married to women with enabling potentials refused them from working just because they believed the woman's place was in the home. This situation has greatly changed as women did all to better their lot but still needed continuous awareness.

Another area where women faced discrimination based on their sex was at the level of owning property. In almost all societies, particularly ethnic groups in Africa, women were not permitted to own land. Such traditional land tenure systems greatly affected women who highly depended on land for farming. In this study area women suffered from such discrimination from men. Consequently, as girls, women farmed with their mothers on their fathers' land and as wives they farmed their husband's land and when a marriage crumbled, no woman was allowed to harvest what she had toiled for. Even till date, efforts at making women own land were not yielding desired fruits in the Western Grasslands, showing that there is need for more measures to be taken to that effect. However, women who have the means now buy and own land, but are still to inherit family land for obvious reasons. Another problem young women faced was breast ironing, which was supposed to inhibit a young girl's breasts from early development. This was considered to expose the girl to lustful and eventual sexual activities from men when the girl was not yet fully matured. Breast ironing was therefore an activity whereby the breast of the girl was forced inwards with the use of mortar pestles and other objects like hot cola nuts leaves or hot stones. This was very common in the Western Grasslands.⁴ Through biology and science classes in

schools, most girls now know more about their reproductive health and would not ignorantly iron their breasts.

From the mid-1980s, Cameroon was plunged into an economic recession which had negative consequences on the population. One consequence of this recession was the drop in the prices of cash crops and basic food stuff. In this study area, the men who relied on coffee as their main source of income were seriously handicapped. Many turned to women for the general wellbeing of their families. The proceeds from the sale of farm produce like corn, beans, potatoes and vegetables were used to pay school fees and buy equipment for pupils, especially in the rural areas. The women saw in themselves potentials that had not been exploited before due to misconceived gender roles. As such, some women started becoming convinced that if they were well equipped with financial and technical support, they could continue to play a complementary role and would become true partners in the development of their families and society at large.⁵ The above situation was further aggravated by the government of Cameroon's decision to devalue her currency in 1994.⁶ The effects of this, especially on income earners were catastrophic. In the main urban centers, the Western Grasslands women took to *buyam sellam* (*peti* trading) to enable their families survive. It was during this period of hardship that some men realized the importance of women earning something no matter how little. The crisis therefore contributed to women realizing that the men would not always be there for them in times of difficulties and that they still needed to survive in the case of the death of their husbands.

In some communities in this study area forced marriage was a rule and not an exception. It also had other associated institutions such as bride wealth, widowhood rites and levirate marriages, which were also considered as repugnant to natural justice and which were common in most African societies. These marriage practices that led to violence against women and children were still being observed. In the Western Grasslands, for example, there was for a long time the preference for a boy child, who was going to inherit the father when he died while girls were prepared only for marriage and motherhood. Women were subjected to humiliating and degrading widowhood rites, and men considered women as property for the simple reason that bride wealth had been paid to their parents. As such, women as property could not inherit. As a child she

² Ibid.

³ The situation of workers in Cameroon has gradually been improving than in other areas of concern.

⁴ The side effects of breast ironing were not pronounced as those of FGM, though all were against Women's Rights.

⁵ This was so because some women equally thought that obedience in marriage was all that was needed from a woman and

all would be well as far as her upkeep was concerned. But time proved them wrong and the result was self-awareness which went a long way to meet but resistance from some men.

⁶ Some men who boasted to their wives discovered that the meagre salaries their wives were earning was sustainable and wished it could be more.

was married off without her consent. This situation however has been reduced to a certain extent as there are still some obstacles due to stagnating nuptial practices. Gender discrimination⁷ thus led to efforts at international and national levels to redress it. These were distinctions, exclusion, and restrictions based on ones' sex aimed at preventing the individual from exercising her rights or freedom; also aimed at preventing the individual from getting access to the various resources made available in his or her society. All what was happening all over the world against women also brought about Feminism⁸ as an emerging theory, which seeks to establish equality between men and women in the political, economic and socio-cultural realms. Feminism, aimed at changing the status quo and power structure between men and women in the society, by revising existing laws, beliefs, paradigms and stereotypes. With all these, customs and traditions in the Western Grasslands in particular and Africa as a whole were targeted due to their associated customs which were considered harmful. This was seen in customs such as preference of boy to girls at the detriment of girls and widowhood practices just to name a few which were common practices in this study area.

Women themselves were blamed for insisting or clinging to the outdated and archaic belief that the woman's place was the home. To them traditional societies could not evolve at the expense of the family.⁹ That means going against tradition put the society and its institution in jeopardy or in danger of extinction. On the other hand, extreme feminist groups argued that if women were to stay traditional, they would not have been allowed to work or run a business. This concept questioned the very basis of educating the girl child. As established by international bodies, this education was the secret behind economic development to begin with. That is why the Cameroon government embarked on free primary education in order to solve some of the problems. But her efforts were still lagging behind as success was only about 40% in the Western Grasslands as to the time of this study these discriminatory practices were from time to time questioned by women and even by some male folks. It was on these bases, that International and National organizations took diverse strategies since 1948 concerning the emancipation of women married or not.

The customs and traditions of marriage of the Western Grasslands had been a great hindrance to the attainment of women's rights and emancipation. The customs and traditions of the Western Grasslands are the total of inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge of ethnic groups, which constitute bases of their shared social behaviour as transmitted and reinforced by members of each group under study over time. It is worth noting again that these traditions were man-made and therefore could be modified and that some are much newer than they claim to be. Restrictions and suppressions were therefore still being experienced by married women, irrespective of external and internal measures to modify them. Human and women's rights activism has brought pressure to bear on customs and traditions of marriage of the Western Grasslands. This can be seen through international and national imperatives concerning modern marriage laws which are being fostered in order to do away with such customs considered as being violent. Customary laws on marriage propagating child marriages, bride wealth with its ramifications and seclusion were a hindrance not only to women's progress, but society at large. Widowhood rites and wife inheritance with their related violence, as it is now being conceived, have attracted criticisms from many angles and positions. Though during the colonial and post-colonial periods, some of the nuptial practices such as levirate marriage, child marriages and forceful polygamy were reduced, but had not been completely eradicated.¹⁰

Due to the resilient, it has been difficult for national, international and civil society organizations to eradicate nuptial customs such as bride wealth, widowhood rites, forceful polygamy and seclusion, in the Western Grasslands owing to the attachment to both the matrilineal and patrilineal practices in the different societies that make up the ethnic groups in the area. Of recent government policy has been insisting on the organization of mass marriages in order to legalize traditional polygamous marriages. This was initiated and tried in Yaoundé, the capital of the Republic of Cameroon, by the Minister of Women Affairs and Promotion of the Family in 2007. The aim was that each region should contract about 5000 of such marriages on yearly bases in order to promote family values and safe guard the security of women and children living in concubine unions in all regions of Cameroon. When married women bore children and had as a natural duty to care for

⁷ Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the bases of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition on basis of equality of men and women, of human and fundamental freedom in the political, economic, cultural, civil or any other field.

⁸ It is an emerging theory which seeks to establish equality between men and women in the political, economic and socio-cultural realms.

⁹ M. N. Welegi, "Factors that Prevent Women from Attaining their Human Rights" in "Women, Children and the Law" FIDA Publication, TENCAM PRESS, Douala, nd. p.20.

¹⁰ L. M., Yenla, "Evolution and Impact of Customs/Traditions of Marriage in the Western Grasslands of Cameroon, Ca 1900-2010" Ph.D Theses in History, UNIYAOI, 2017, p.240.

the home, at first it bred no contempt, but with time they were forced to come out from dependency. With societal transformation by Christianity and Colonialism which introduced western values, characterized by individualism, demands and the ever increasing wants with limited resources, the married women have been forced to deviate from their traditionally or socially imposed natural duty of child bearing and care for the home. In trying to meet up with life exigencies, customs and traditions became a hindrance to the progress of women and girl children in the area.

The Western Grasslands geographically represent the present North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. It is part of the social ensemble generally referred to in the Colonial History of Cameroon as the Western Grass fields.¹¹ It has been peopled in succession from the ancient times by ethnic communities from different backgrounds, notably the Tikar, Tiv, Mambila, Chamba, Widikum, the Hausa and the Fulani. The region as far back as the 19th century was already considered to be densely populated, to go by West African standards. In 1890 it had an estimated population of 214,000 inhabitants which more than doubled in 1953 when it hit a mark of 429,038 inhabitants.¹² Concerning the post-independence population statistics, the region in 1976 had a population of 980,581 inhabitants coming from two predominant systems of marriage; patrilineal and matrilineal.¹³ With all the above problems facing women of the Western Grasslands, international efforts were made for countries to inculcate them into their constitutions to foster women emancipation.

II. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES ON WOMEN EMANCIPATION

The evolution of the emancipation of the African woman cannot be complete without the role of the various international conferences concerning the amelioration of the conditions of women in the world and Africa in particular. The United Nations (UN) declared 1975, the international year of the woman and from 1975, four conferences have been held concerning the plight of women in general and that of the African woman in particular. These conferences

included the Mexico Conference in 1975, the Copenhagen conference that was held in 1980, the Nairobi Conference held in 1985, the Beijing Conference held in 1995 and the New York Conference on women in the year 2000¹⁴. These conferences united the international community in a quest for women emancipation in both public and private spheres. This had a direct bearing on women of the Western Grasslands who at first indirectly and later participated in some of these conferences and knowledge gained helped them in warding off harmful customs, which hindered their progress in various aspects of their lives. Before the inception of the UN which was the major force behind women equality only 30 out of 51 countries upon its creation allowed women equal rights to vote and hold public offices. In order to enhance women's role in their various societies, they embraced conferencing and encouraged non-governmental organization involvement as best mediums in raising awareness and educating women on their rights and the process began in 1975 with the Mexico Conference.

In Mexico in 1975 a Conference was held wherein there was the declaration of the UN decade for women to begin from 1976 to 1985, which launched a new era in global efforts to promote the advancement of women by opening a worldwide dialogue on gender equality.¹⁵ A process of learning was therefore set in motion, which involved deliberation, negotiation, setting objectives, identifying obstacles and reviewing the progress made. The Mexico City conference was called for by the UN General Assembly to attract international attention on the need to develop future oriented goals, effective strategies and plans of action for the advancement of women. To this end, the General Assembly identified three key objectives that became the basis for the work of the UN on behalf of women, full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination, the integration and full participation of women in development and an increased contribution by women in the strengthening of world peace.¹⁶ The conference responded by adopting a world plan of action; a document that offered guidelines for governments and the international community to follow for the next ten years in pursuit of the three key objectives set by the General Assembly. The Plan of Action set minimum target to be met

¹¹ The Western Grassfields in Cameroon is made up of the Western Grasslands of the North West Region, the Bamileké country and the Bamoum kingdom of the present West Region. These regions from a socio-anthropological point of view form a geographical as well as a cultural continuum. See J.-P. Warnier, P.N. Nkwi and J.-P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, Yaoundé, Publication of the Department of Sociology, The University of Yaounde, 1982, p.6. J.-P. Warnier, "Pre-colonial Mankon: The Development of a Cameroon Chiefdom in its Regional Setting", Ph.D thesis in Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1975, p. 494.

¹³ North West Regional Service of Statistics, 2001.

¹⁴ WWW.UN.org/women_watch/daw/follow_up/session/press_kit/hist.htm. Four Conferences on Women, Historical Perspective, 1975-1995. Retrieved on 15th June 2013.

¹⁵ The first world conference on the status of women was convened in Mexico City to coincide with the 1975 International Women's Year, observed to remind the international community that discrimination against women continued to be a persistent problem in most parts of the world.

¹⁶ See www.un.org, Four Women Conferences.

by 1980 which focused on securing equal access for women to resources such as education, employment opportunities, political, participation, health services, housing, nutrition and family planning.¹⁷ By this period Cameroon like other African countries was still grappling with internal politics and Cameroon as whole could hardly benefit from such forums even if she participated. As such, women of the Western Grasslands continued in their plight.

However, this approach marked a change which had started to take shape in the early 1970s in the way that women were perceived. Whereas previously women had been seen as passive recipients of support and assistance, they were then viewed as full and equal partners to men, with equal rights to resources and opportunities. A similar transformation was taking place in the approach to development, with a shift from an earlier belief that development served to advance women to a new consensus that such development was not possible without the full participation of women.¹⁸ By this period the Western Grasslands women were still ignorant of their rights to the extent that gaining awareness could yield only little fruits due to customs and traditions which, had hindered there progress in education. Hence, only very few participated in public life. The Conference called upon governments to formulate national strategies and identify targets and priorities in their efforts to promote the equal participation of women. By the end of the United Nations Decade for Women, 127 member states had responded by establishing some form of national machines, institutions dealing with the promotion of policy research and programs aimed at women's advancement and participation in development. Towards the end of the Mexico Conference there were sharp differences among the women who gathered at the Forum. The discussions in the forum reflected the political and economic realities of the time.¹⁹ While women from the Eastern Block, communist countries for instance were interested in issues of peace, those from the west and developing world emphasized equality and development respectively. Nevertheless, the forum played an important role in bringing together women and men from different cultures and backgrounds to share information and opinions. This was aimed at setting in motion a process that helped unite the women's movement, which by the end of the Decade for women became truly international. The Forum was also instrumental in opening up the UN to NGOs

who provided access for the voices of women to the organization's policy making process. Cameroon by this time was under a dictatorship and only mission bodies operating in the study areas such as the Catholic and Protestants engaged in enlightening women in the Western Grasslands in a bid to ward off negative impact of customs and traditions considered repugnant to natural justice since the British Cameroons High Court Law of 1955 was more or less subsumed by the bi-jural system after independence. A follow up of the resolutions of the Mexico Conference had to be revisited in the Copenhagen Conference of 1980.

In 1980, another Conference was held in Copenhagen in order to review the process put in place at the Mexico Conference as earlier stated. During this conference, there was general consensus that significant progress had been made since 1975. Before then, in 1979, the UN General Assembly had adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in December 1979. By this, women could boost of a law which was specialized to cater for all their predicaments and not the general Human Rights which entailed equality but was not realistic. This was thus one of the most powerful instruments for women equality.²⁰ The convention termed "The Bill of Rights for Women" by then legally bonded 165 states which had become states parties and obliged them to report within one year of ratification, and subsequently every four years, on the steps they had taken to remove obstacles they faced in implementing the convention. No report on, neither human rights nor women's rights could be made from Cameroon, since she was under a dictatorship and only the churches were there to propagate their doctrine which however, appealed only to the consciences of Christians while the rest of the non-converts continued to live under bondage. Despite the progress made, the Copenhagen Conference recognized that signs of disparity were beginning to emerge between rights secured and women's ability to exercise these rights. To address this concern, the conference pinpointed three areas where specific highly focused action was essential if the broad goals of equality, development and peace, identified by the Mexico Conference were to be reached. These three areas were equal access to education, employment opportunities and adequate health care services.²¹ To this

¹⁷ Through the UN's other Agencies such as UNESCO much efforts were made to reach some of these goals which Cameroon benefited. But we could not lay hands on reference to show that women of this region also benefited from grants given by UN Agencies.

¹⁸ See www.un.org, Four Women Conferences.

¹⁹ www.un-documents.net/mex-dec.htm. NGO Committee on Education of the Conference of NGOS. Retrieved on 7th June 2013.

²⁰ See Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW).

²¹ Even as at now we were still to attain full access to education, full employment opportunity and adequate health care due world economic recession.

end, Cameroon as a whole was still lagging behind as only regional and divisional headquarters had schools.

The deliberations at the Copenhagen Conference took place in the shadow of political tensions, some of them carried over from the Mexico City Conference. Nevertheless, the Conference came to a close with the adoption of a program of action, albeit not by consensus. A variety of factors were cited for the discrepancy between legal rights and women's ability to exercise these rights. The issues raised included, insufficient involvement of men in improving women's role in society, absence of recognition of the value of women's contribution to society, inadequate attention to particular needs of women in planning, a shortage of women in decision-making position, unsatisfactory services to support the role of women in national life, such as cooperatives, day-care centers and credit facilities, overall lack of necessary financial resources and awareness among women about the opportunities available to them. To address these concerns, the Copenhagen Program of Action called for, among other things, stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights to inheritance, custody of children and loss of nationality. Delegates at the conference also urged an end to stereotyped attitudes towards women.²² Even though some women were already aware of their plight in the Western Grasslands, many impediments ranging from poverty to ignorance and the adamant of men to liberate them stood on their way. This is because the 1955 law against customs and traditions considered as repugnant to natural justice and equity could handle only cases from monogamous marriages, while the rest of the cases which emanated from customs were handled by customary courts which did not respect the rights of women. This was the situation before the Nairobi Conference of 1985.

In 1985, another conference took place in Nairobi and was looked upon as the birth of global feminism. The movement for gender equality had gained a true global recognition at the third world conference, which was held to review and appraise the achievements of the United Nations Decade for women. "Equality, Development and Peace" was the theme of the conference convened in Nairobi. With 15,000 representatives of NGOs attending the parallel NGO forum, many referred to the conference as the "birth of global feminism" because there was high representation

from women of all walks of life and governmental and NGOs from nearly all countries belonging to the UN. The women's movement, divided as earlier mentioned by world politics and economic realities at the Mexico Conference, became an international force unified.²³ A lot of information, knowledge and experience had been gathered through the process of discussion, negotiation and revision. At the same time delegates were confronted with shocking reports. Data gathered by the UN revealed that improvements in the status of women and efforts to reduce discrimination had benefited only a small minority of women.²⁴ Improvements in the situation of women in the developing world had been marginal at best. In short, the objectives of the second half of the United Nations Decade for Women (UNDW) had not been met. This realization demanded that a new approach be adopted. The Nairobi Conference was given the Mandate to seek new ways to overcome the obstacles of achieving the Decades goals. Though Governments were timid, front line churches that took part in the conference came in with enthusiasm as they preached equality, development and peace in churches and women's' gatherings. This enabled women who could not afford education to realize that their development in the Western Grasslands lay in their hands, though the church itself was not free from accusation as it propagated the inequality of women with men somehow. For example during solemnization of marriages be it religious or statutory women were and are still told to be submissive even when it has to hinder their progress as experience has shown.

Another conference for women, known as the Nairobi Forward-looking strategies to the year 2000 followed in the same month in Kenya in July 1985. The strategies developed and adopted by consensus by the 157 participating governments was an updated blue prints for the future of women to the end of the century. It broke new ground as it declared all issues to be women's issues. Women's participation in decision-making and the handling of all human affairs was recognized not only as their legitimate right but as a social and political necessity that had to be incorporated in all institutions of society. At the heart of the document was a series of measures for achieving equality at the national level. Governments were to set their own priorities based on their development policies and resource capabilities. Three basic categories of

²² This looked like paper work which had never been seen by the people of this region due to their bride wealth institution which give right to men to own women as property after payment of such.

²³ Churches took over to propagate these themes but the questions remains as to how many Christians were there and how many followed what they were told to do.

²⁴ For example only people who had access to information could benefit from it at they did. As such, people of the Grasslands when questioned show very limited knowledge of Human Rights of Women especially in rural Bamenda..

measures were constitutional and legal steps; equality in social participation identified and equality in political participation and decision-making.²⁵ Following this, the Cameroon Government adopted the policy of Health for all by the Year 2000, wherein women were targeted at anti natal clinics and encouraged to take family planning methods in order to avoid infant and maternal deaths. In the Western Grasslands during anti natal clinics visits women were lured to go in for artificial family planning methods in all the hospitals and health centers especially government owned. However lofty this policy were, they did not succeed due to after effects of some of the family planning methods which caused more health hazards due to side effects. Having children at random still continued to be the order of the day among all ethnic groups, especially among rural couples in the Western Grasslands.

In keeping with the view that all issues were women's issues, the measures recommended by the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (NFLS) covered a wide range of subjects from employment, health, education, and social services, to industry, science, communication and the environment. In addition, guidelines for national measures to promote women's participation in efforts to promote peace, as well as to assist women in special situations of distress were proposed. Accordingly, the Nairobi Conference urged government to delegate responsibilities for women's issues to all institutional offices and programs. The Nairobi Conference introduced a wider approach to the advancement of women. It was then recognized that women's equality, far from being an isolated issue, encompassed every sphere of human activity. Therefore, women's perceptive and active involvement in all issues and not only women issues was essential if the goals and objectives of the Decade for Women were to be attained. While the efforts of the previous two decades, starting with the Mexico City Conference in 1975, helped to improve women's conditions and access to resources, they had not been able to change the basic structure of inequality in the relationship between men and women. Till date, these inequalities in terms of marital laws from various dimensions were still noticed in the Western Grasslands.²⁶ Recognition of the need to involve women in decision-making began to emerge during the course of the series of global conference held by the UN in the early 1970s as seen

above on various aspects of development, the environment, human rights, population and social development. These conferences stressed on the importance of women's full participation in decision-making and women's perspective were incorporated into the deliberations and the documents that were adopted. This continued to the 1990s with the Beijing Conference of 1995.

It was in the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995,²⁷ that a new chapter in the struggle for gender equality can truly be said to have begun. The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society and all relations between men and women within it had to be re-evaluated. It was discovered that only by such fundamental restructuring of the society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners to men in all aspects of life. This change therefore represented a strong reaffirmation that women's rights were human rights and that gender equality was an issue of universal concern benefiting all.²⁸ Even so, women were yet to prove their worth in certain aspects of life which demand complementarity than the much talked about equality. Although women claim they could bury the dead, hardly could they dig graves like men especially in difficult stony terrain. Though artificial insemination exists, only women have wombs to nurture fetuses to grow.

So, the issue should have been liberating women from stereotypes, as it was still to happen in the Western Grasslands. The legacy of the Beijing Conference is that it sparked off a renewed global commitment to the empowerment of women everywhere and drew unprecedented international attention. The conference unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,²⁹ which was in essence an agenda for women's empowerment and stood as a milestone for the advancement of women in the twenty-first century. The Platform for Action specified twelve critical areas of concern considered to represent the main obstacles to women's advancement and which required concrete action by government and civil society. These areas were women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making,

participation in the society. The most controversial section of the platform concerned reproductive rights, particularly the right to have abortion.

²⁵ Cameroon did make that all of that was taken care of in the stipulated areas as seen ahead.

²⁶ Patriarchal governments in Africa ratified these conventions but failed to march their words with action and women representation in decision making remains low even as at now in many African countries.

²⁷ The UN's Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China, in 1995. The POA that emerged from the conference focused on the removal of obstacles to women's

²⁸ See www.beijing women conference, assessed on 10/10/2014.

²⁹ Most often men mocked women and such question, as what did you women bring from Beijing?, Did you not go to Beijing to seize your rights, and one wondered whether men actually knew that if the POA were to be realized it would benefit all.

institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, Human rights of women, women and the media, the women and the environment and the girl child.³⁰ That violence against women continued to feature in these conferences is an indication that it was a worldwide phenomenon. As such, one gets baffled when one reads about strides already taken but which did not reflect the situation on the ground as was the case in the Western Grasslands because only very few women from this study area participated in public life and many still undergo torture in relationships.

By adopting the Beijing Platform for Action, governments committed themselves to the effective inclusion of a gender dimension throughout all their institutions, policies planning and decision-making. What these in effect meant was that before decisions were to be made or plans to be implemented, both men and women were to be involved. For example, instead of striving to make an existing educational system gradually more accessible to women, gender mainstreaming had to call for a reconstruction of the system so it would meet the needs of women and men equally. The introduction of gender mainstreaming called for the re-examination of society in its entirety and its basic structure of inequality. The focus was therefore no longer limited to women and their status in society, but was committed to restructuring institutions and political and economic decision-making in society as a whole.³¹ In Cameroon as a whole and the Western Grasslands in particular, this was still in the process but by 2010, when the scope ends, the situation was still beyond expectation.

In endorsing the Platform for Action, the UN General Assembly called upon all states, the UN system and the other international organizations, as well as NGOs and the private sector to take action to implement its recommendations. Within member states, national machineries that had been established to promote the status of women were assigned a new function as the central policy-coordinating unit to mainstream a gender perspective throughout all institutions and programs. Though primary education for all was being pursued in Cameroon, in the study area many children were still to enjoy it. This was owing to stagnating customs such as that which allow children to be given to chiefs as wives. This was also the case with ethnic groups such as the Hausa and the Fulani, who give out children to marriage.

The Beijing conference was considered a great success both in terms of its attendance and its outcome. It was the largest gathering of government and NGO representatives ever held with 17,000 in attendance, including representatives of 189 governments. The NGO Forum held parallel to the Conference also broke all records, bringing the combined number of participants to over 47,000.³² The presence and influence of NGOs, one of the most active forces in the drive for gender equality had increased dramatically since the Mexico City Conference in 1975. In Beijing, NGOs directly influenced the content of the platform for Action and they continued to play an important role in holding their national leaders accountable for the commitment they had made to the platform.³³ Just the awareness generated by this conference, sometimes it frightened men in this study area to provokingly remind women that they had been to Beijing. It thus shows that it had an effect on the way that even uneducated men now perceive women in the region more especially as government imposes quarters in legislative and parliamentary elections enabling more women to participate in politics.

Women also went to Harare and came up with the Harare Declaration. This was the initiative of a non-governmental organization precisely the World Council of Churches (WCC). It was a follow up of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches' in Solidarity with Women. The conference took place from the 27th to 30th November 1998. The aim of the conference was to assess the growth of the church, ten years after its inception. Over a thousand women and thirty men from around the globe attended the conference. At the end of the meeting, the women and men of the Decade festival declared "... we are committed to God's mission of the world where all of Gods' people can live fully cared for and share the resources of the world equitably, dwell in harmony with creation and affirm one another in the image of God."³⁴ Here, the women called for the creation of opportunities and for women to speak out fearlessly against violence and the abuse of women, in order to break the culture of silence. It was even a taboo to discuss certain marital problems in public in the Western Grasslands such as marital rape. They affirmed their vision of a world of economic justice where poverty is neither tolerated nor justified. Finally, the conference called for "the creation of just economic systems and just structure in the church and society so that women and men can experience the blessing of justice, equal pay for equal work,

³⁰ See www.un.org, Four Women Conferences.

³¹ Ibid.

³² K. Schultheiss., "Women Rights" Microsoft student 2009 (DVD) Redmond, Wa, Microsoft Corporation 2008, retrieved on 16th June 2013.

³³ Many of such NGOS existed in Cameroon immediately after the conference but due to lack of support many have shied away and awareness campaigns has continued to dwindle

³⁴ J. B. Endeley & Al., *New Gender Studies*, (nd) p.36.

sustainable and livable wages and honourable labour practices.”³⁵

This declaration served as a booster to many religious denominations like the Presbyterian, the Catholic and the Baptist. Of these churches, the Protestants in general could be said to have achieved much within the framework of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in solidarity with the Women, in the domain of church legislation and has changed the perceptions among Bible scholars and theologians. Women were now being ordained as pastors into the ministry and fully participate in decision making circles of their churches. In the Presbyterian Church in the Western Grasslands, it is constitutionally mandated that 50% of all synod must be women. All the elected elders into the synod committee of the church are all women.³⁶ These ideas went a long way to upgrade the status of married and single women in churches.

By the year 2000 the UN came up with its famous Millennium Development Goals, which were to be followed for a period of fifteen years (2000-2015) and these were a series of objectives envisaged by the international community. The declaration took place during the 55th session of the UNO in New York. It was the continuation of the strides already started in the previous summits of Beijing and Nairobi-Kenya. Eight goals were targeted, but the focus was pinpointed on four, which directly concerned the women.³⁷ Point four of the MDGs, for example, called for gender equality between men and women and the improvement of the conditions of women as far as mortality rate was concerned. It was noticed with dismay that women, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, were still being greatly discriminated against. In matters of education, for instance, priority was also still being given to the male child as less than two-third of the female population had access to elementary education, though they constituted the greater percentage of the population.³⁸ The Western Grasslands was therefore a perfect example of such discrimination due to customs and traditions, though the situation was gradually improving. All of the conferences did have a worldwide effect as far as women political emancipation was concerned.

III. DOMESTICATING INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS AND WOMEN IN POLITICS

After independence and reunification between the Southern Cameroons and *la Republique du Cameroun* in 1961,

women more than before emerged in the agendas of most discussions at the national and international levels. The major stakeholders remained religious institutions, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The State created an enabling environment, which helped enhanced the strides towards the empowerment of the women in the Western Grasslands and beyond. Cameroon, like most countries around the globe, equally made some major international commitments regarding the issue of women empowerment and gender equality. This is seen in the state’s policy of women’s advancement in the country in general and the NWR in particular. The Head of State, Paul Biya unlike his predecessor, stood up clearly in support of women in his speech in Maroua on 2 October 1997 “...Cameroonian women, I pledge to foster women’s advancement and shall not fail to do so...”³⁹ The major policy guidelines focused on a wide range of issues which affected women in the Western Grasslands equally as seen below.

In the domain of women’s effective participation in decision-making, a lot has been done by promoting the equitable representation of women at all levels of decision making; encouragement of gender equity and equality through legislative reforms. The government tried to protect and promote the girl child by coming out with measures aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against the girl child and eliminate violence against women, taught and inculcated the notion of peace to men and women in their private and public lives, sensitized women on the need to denounce all forms of violence against them, provides care to victims of violence, informed men and women on the negative outcome of violence on women at individual and collective levels.⁴⁰ Although the state had provided for services such as the Social Welfare at the Regional and Divisional levels, owing to ignorance many women did not therefore benefit from this government initiative as expected in the Western Grasslands as the study reveals.

There was improvement in the institutional framework for mainstreaming women in development. This was through setting up an effective coordination system between Ministry of the Women Affairs and Promotion of the Family and other ministries or advisory structures in a bid to step up and improve services intended for women, enable Cameroon to tailor its activity coordination structure for women’s advancement to nation and international

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p.43.

³⁷ http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/millennium_Development_Goals, retrieved on the 6th June 2013.

³⁸ www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals, retrieved on the 6th June 2013.

³⁹ “Cameroon Tribune”, Number 144, 1997, p.3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.4.

aspirations.⁴¹ Since the 1970s, the government embraced the principles of gender equality and equity. It did not only signed and ratified international agreements such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also the important convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). This committed the government to ensure respects of women's and men's rights and dignity. Cameroon institutionalized its commitment to address gender issues and to promote women's advancement through the creation in 1984 of the Ministry of Women's affairs. As indicated earlier customs remained on the way and hampered the realization of most of these in the NWR of Cameroon.

Cameroon also ratified the 1951 convention calling for equal remuneration for male and female workers. The Cameroon Labour Code of 1974 (Law Number 74/41) Articles 1 and 67 specifically respects the principle of gender equality stressing on the aspect that workers are guaranteed equal wages for the same type of work, qualification, and output irrespective of sex. Moreover, Cameroon has a catalogue of laws guaranteeing women's rights in a wide range of different areas encompassing criminal law, marriage, economics, financial benefits, politics, nationality, health, and freedom to worship. Awareness campaigns on these issues enabled some women thus to have the courage to free themselves from obnoxious customs and traditions in the study area.

According to the 1995 UNDP Human Development Report, Cameroon was not among the 55 countries which have lower average wages for women who did the same work as men. The labour code (Article 84 (2) and Section 85 respectively, entails fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave to nursing mothers and a one hour of breast-feeding time to be taken without prior notice.⁴² In general, statistical trends since the 1970s show that women's participation in education, health, economic and political institutions increased in Cameroon between 1970 and 1992. Cameroon witnessed the closing of the gap between female and male expectations in areas of life span, literacy and of enrolment at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.⁴³ Women of the NWR in Cameroon were found in profession like nursing, teaching, merchandise, and tailoring just to name a few. Unpaid work remained domestic chores which was a worldwide phenomenon.

Because the Cameroon government ratified the celebration of the International Women's Day, this day was

celebrated with pump and pageantry in the whole of Cameroon, the Western Grasslands inclusive. The International Day of Women dates back to the late 19th century. The day was already being celebrated in Europe as from 1911, following Clara Zetkin's calling. However, the UNO finally adopted a resolution in 1977, inviting countries to set aside one day for the celebration of women's rights and international peace. Eight March thus became the date of recognition for most countries, including Cameroon.

The International Women's Day is therefore commemorated in Cameroon on the eight of March yearly, since its inception in 1986.⁴⁴ This day was being observed as a day of reflection on the conditions of women. It was to evaluate the extent to which the rights of women were being respected together with what remains to be done. Since its inception, many proposals through seminars have been made all geared towards ameliorating the conditions of the women, though the day has not been given proper reflection in many circles. However, these seminars followed the themes for sensitization of the women given by the UN, one of which attracted attention in 2010.⁴⁵ In this study area, this day was usually remarkable especially in the Regional, Divisional and Sub-Divisional Head-Quarters. A chain of activities covering roughly a week were organized. This was done largely by the civil society groups and NGOs. Among the activities that were envisaged to sensitize women were seminars and workshops on vital issues in the socio-economic and political domains or themes. Social issues threatening humankind in general and the female folk in particular were also handled. Among the many active associations, the North West Women's Empowerment Forum has been championing this course as its network runs nationwide.

Parades were organized and women from all walks of life took to the podium and highlighted their plight and determination to go to higher heights. This was done through labeled placards bearing information on equality and freedom of women. However, the rural women were greatly exempted from these activities as they were yet to know the essence of the commemoration. In spite of the holistic aim of the celebration of this day, one wonders, the extent to which the women were to be effectively empowered. It was also noticed that conferences organized during this period did not include men from various rungs of the society in the Western Grasslands, as this would have facilitated their awareness. However, whether literate or

⁴¹ Ibid., p.3.

⁴² E. Joyce., Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment in Societies in Cameroon: How does money fit in? Gender and Development, Vol. 9. Yaounde 2001. p.35.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ [Thesticklandatyourserivce.blogspot.com/.../International Women's Day...ht](http://thesticklandatyourserivce.blogspot.com/.../International%20Women's%20Day...ht), retrieved on the 7th June 2013

⁴⁵ See International Women's Day UN Official Themes since 1996.

not, many women had gained ways through which they could affect certain changes they needed in their lives.

IV. WOMEN IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The government of Cameroon took strides to improve and enhance the well being of women. Among the measures put in place were the improvement of basic education, the raising of the level of enrolment in schools and vocational training, the creation of jobs and enabling employment for women, the facilitation of women's access to health facilities, education on health and peace, potable water and decent lodging conditions and has reinforce social assistance to resolve women's basic social problems.⁴⁶ On women's legal status, the government set up structures to ensure the protection of women; eradicate all forms of discrimination against women, promote social justice and enhance female human resources in all areas of development. The state also wanted to step up productivity by giving them the opportunity to venture into prior inaccessible areas, for examples train, teach and encourage women, diversify women's activities and their sources of income and encourage women's access to factors of production.⁴⁷ The women of the Western Grasslands, therefore benefitted from such policies though not as expected.

The state, through the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family, made important progress in the domain of women empowerment. The activities of Women' Empowerment Center Bamenda, became a pace setter as the creation of other centers were to follow in the rest of the divisional headquarters. This main empowerment center started as a community based organization and was later taken by the CNU and CPDM regimes. In 1985, the center was handed to the government under the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs. In 1997, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was created. The year 2000 marked a turning point as a special text created women's empowerment centers which were specialized technical units of the Ministry of Women's Affairs.⁴⁸ However, the reorganization in 2005 creating the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family by a Prime Ministerial degree worked in the advantage of the women. Some trainees came either to improve on their trade or to learn new skills so as to better their aptitudes.

The Bamenda Empowerment Center is comprised of three departments. These are the Departments of Textile

and Decoration; Catering and Hotel Management and Computer Sciences. It offers a yearly program, which runs from September to August and training at a moderate fee of 30000 francs CFA. Though training was envisaged for a year, those who were slow were given remedial classes for them to catch up with the others. It admitted women of all classes and ages who were drawn from the various ethnic groups of Cameroon residing in Bamenda. Non-nationals were not exempted. For instance, students from Equatorial Guinea enrolled. Apart from the older generation of students, most of the students were school drop-outs due to unwanted pregnancies and other social hazards.⁴⁹ The school operates under the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family. That is why the teachers were drawn from co-ministries of Secondary Educational and vocational training. As concerned the cost of management, the girls and women were expected to render physical services (weaving, assembling of beads and the like), to augment their school fees. However, with the decentralization process on the move, the council has been contributing to the institute's functioning.⁵⁰

Here, economic empowerment triumphed. The training was geared towards self-employment and entrepreneurship. The Catering and hotel management students took care of the production of a wide variety of produce such as cooked food, egg-scorch, fish pie, making and icing of cakes to mention a few. The textile and decoration department produced dresses curtains, bed sheets while the computer department was charged with general documentation tips. Most of the products were sold at the center or during exhibitions.⁵¹ This was where women in Mezam Division faced with financial difficulties in starting off a trade or other forms of businesses went to overcome this obstacle, as the Empowerment Center came up with a revolving loan scheme to support trainees start off a business. This loan scheme also known as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HPIC) support project for poor women and it extended to all vulnerable women. The maximum amount to be loaned out was 250,000 CFA Francs. It had payment duration of a year and an interest rate of fifteen percent. In addition, the center also organized a series of workshops and seminars on income generating activities. This went a long way to arm the women financially.⁵²

The activities of the Bamenda Empowerment Center were not only felt in the City and its environs but they extended to the rural areas of Bafut, Bali, Santa and

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ B., Ndoping, Directrice of Mezam Women Empowerment Centre, Bamenda, 10th June 2014.

⁴⁹ Idem.

⁵⁰ Idem.

⁵¹ Idem.

⁵² Idem.

neighbouring villages. The rural women were sensitized through animation and free educative talks. One of such activities was the production of washing soap, which enabled women to manage their own lives. The center also worked with village authorities on mentality change on vital issues as the rights of women to landed property. This involved the use of role-models, for instance, those women who had a sound educational background in the community. This helped women to become responsible at an early age.⁵³

The efforts of the Empowerment Center of Western were not independent. Other stakeholders such as the “sister” Ministries like Agriculture, Education, and Livestock were involved in the processes of women’s empowerment. Non-Governmental Organizations like Cameroon Institute of University Women (COMESUT) and Female Jurist Association of Cameroon (FIDA), were veritable partners in the strides to women’s empowerment in the Western Grasslands of Cameroon⁵⁴ These centers were to be opened in future in all divisional and sub divisional headquarters since the Bamenda center could not increase its intake due to infrastructural limitations. apart from the above, other initiatives were made at community levels through the help of Civic Society.

V. WOMEN IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ENDEAVOURS

The stride towards empowerment was also the concern of the civil society. This was realized with the support of NGOs and individuals. The Self-Help Cooperative Association (SEHECO) in Bafut is a good example to demonstrate how the rural women were being empowered. This association was created on the 14th of February 1996 in compliance with Law N° 92/006 of 14 August 1992 relating to cooperative societies and common initiative groups with its degree of application being N° 92/455/PM of 23 November 1992. It was accorded the registration N° NW/GP/01/96/1077 signed by Peter Akum (Agricultural Economist). Its head quarter was Bafut.⁵⁵ Its creation was inspired by ex-students of Presbyterian Secondary Girls Schools Bafut in Switzerland. The pioneers were Salesmen and sister Biggy. The latter innovations were significant as she was the one who secured the authorization certificate. Their gifts also permitted the group to secure some machines and patterns at the early stage of its creation.⁵⁶ Membership was strictly regulated. The first step was the interview. The aim of this was to know the level of skills

that the individual possessed at the entry level since quality was the guiding principle in the institute. After the interview, the individual proceeded to the second stage (practical test) during which she paid an amount of ten thousand francs (10.000FCFA) for material that was to be used in the course of training.⁵⁷ However, to gain full membership, the individual had to pay an amount of 100.000 CFA Francs. It was after the submission of the stated amount that the women in question had full membership.⁵⁸ It must be borne in mind that if the quality of production dropped along the line, the individual’s membership was seized.⁵⁹

In terms of equipment, SEHECO as a promising institute to boost women’s empowerment in Bafut had nine machines and four tables together with preservation cupboards for storage of products. However, the working premise was a Presbyterian Secondary Girls’ School building which the women rented from the authorities. They also paid their electricity bills. The Presbyterian authorities on their part furnished these women with pieces of advice.⁶⁰ Although this institute, since its inception, had registered only fifteen women, their accomplishments were enormous. According to Elisabeth, SEHECO enabled her help her husband in the education of her five kids who moved to greater heights as one went to the Higher Teacher Training College. Again, during the close of the school year, the women were able to donate prizes for female students, especially those of the Presbyterian Girls Secondary School.⁶¹

SEHECO, operating under the PCC canopy as a common initiative group, did much as far as the empowerment of the rural Bafut women was concerned. The continued encouragement of ex-students (girls) and even girls who were school drop-outs was clear proof that the center came to stay.⁶² Among the many products from the center were baby suits, girl’s gowns, table mats, toys, travelling bags, girl’s free wears, *kaba*, patch work bag, children trousers and general gowns. Marketing of the products was done by the management of the group. This group had an executive with the most important personalities being the president, accountant and the coordinator. At first, the produce were directed to Switzerland but later, the volume exported dropped. The reasons of this fall were two fold. Firstly, higher exporting charges forced the management to increase the prices of these products. On the part of the Swiss, importation charges made them to be discouraged. Quality in this center

⁵³ Idem.

⁵⁴ Idem.

⁵⁵ D., Ngufu, Age 52, Seamstress, Bafut, 18/1/2014.

⁵⁶ E., Njimuwe, Age 49, Seamstress, Bafut, 18/1/2014.

⁵⁷ Interview with Ngufu.

⁵⁸ Interview with Njimuwe.

⁵⁹ Idem.

⁶⁰ Idem.

⁶¹ Idem.

⁶² Idem.

was imperative and as such, control was effectuated every Thursday of the week. Sales were also effectuated at the center and during occasions like the Baptist conference, though a significant proportion went to Yaoundé.⁶³ Though this helped only drop outs from schools, it however went along to help these Bafut women to survive. Without the center, perhaps some would have engaged themselves only in unfruitful marriages as a result of such frustration, wherein with an unwanted pregnancy, it was believed the girl had only one option but marriage. Religious institutions also helped in women emancipation in the Western Grasslands.

Before beginning an analysis of the efforts of religious institutions in empowering the women in the Western Grasslands, it is important to emphasize that though Christianity and the Islamic faith reigned, a great number of the population remained animists. Focus is on the Church with the examples of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC), the Catholics and the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) without forgetting the activities of the Muslims. The church in general and the PCC in particular were very concerned with promoting Women's empowerment activities because women constituted the bulk of the population. The PCC Church was established in Mezam in 1958 and the first localities to host the church were Bafut and the Bali neighbourhoods. In the PCC, more than two-third of the population of Christians were women. Therefore the church came to understand that if it were to serve as a catalyst to move the community forward, the women had to be equipped.⁶⁴ The church continued its traditional role of evangelization. Through evangelism, the women were sensitized to see their capabilities and worth in society. Many congregations of the PCC, from the very urban to the rural communities, had women as chairpersons. This church empowered women to stand and speak for their rights. Most significantly was the right to earn income in the study area.

Women's empowerment in Mezam greatly benefited from the aid of the PCC. It was within the church that the strides were visible and affected in most or all levels of the church hierarchy, as the women showed their worth. The Treasurer of the Synod was Mrs Ennes (a white) and female pastors were present in almost all Congregations.⁶⁵ In the Bafut neighbourhood, there was Pastor Miss Fonyam Becky and Navagtache Angela. This was great innovation when compared with the Catholic Church that was yet to

have a female priest. It was not only in the domain of evangelization that the PCC showed its worth. The realm of education was significant. Women were raised to the ranks of head teachers in the various schools owned by the PCC in the NWR.⁶⁶ The CBC that came into being in 1957 also played its own role in emancipation of women in the region. The CBC Women's Union, through the assistance of their Sisters abroad, embarked on projects in the domains of health, education and religion to fight against poverty among women in most parts of their strongholds in the various Divisions in the Western Grasslands. In the area of health, the local Baptist women, under the supervision of white missionary sisters took lessons in basic hygiene to reduce contamination and spread of diseases. This was followed by the creation of a Nursing School at Nso' with Aid Posts and Health Board of the CBC to train nurses and nurse-aids of all sexes.⁶⁷

Socio-economically, the Cameroon Baptist Women, developed skills for self-help projects like knitting, sewing, weaving and basketry among local women, which helped, empowered them financially and which in turn, helped to supplement the welfare of their families. The target groups were the young female drop-outs, whom after training enabled them to market their products in order to better their lives. As a continuation, local Baptist women were taught modern techniques of collective farming of food crops. Examples were carrots, potatoes, tomatoes and spices. These produces were for local consumption and equally served as a source of income to women, who could not wait for their men to provide for them as customs prescribed.⁶⁸ The Baptist women also embarked on evangelization. In this view, it was not enough to satisfy the women physically, as they had spiritual needs as well, "for man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the book of God" and in Christ Jesus we are poverty-free.⁶⁹ The CBC, especially the women's Union, hoped to achieve greater success in alleviating poverty amongst women through meeting their needs both materially and spiritually.⁷⁰

The examples of the PCC and CBC demonstrated the zeal at which religious institutions were attached to women empowerment. The women organs in these institutions gave guidance to the women on credit creation, home economics and general sanitation. Paradoxically, the proliferation of churches after the 1980s witnessed many ills in the church. The ethics and morals that guided the society

⁶³ Interview with Njimuwe.

⁶⁴ J., Pefok. Aged 58, CWF President, Ntamulung-Bamenda, 16th January 2014.

⁶⁵ M., Fusi, Age 62, Head Teacher, Bafut, 18/1/2014.

⁶⁶ Idem.

⁶⁷H., Anyangwe, Age 64, Retired Pedagogic Inspector, Bamenda. 3/09/2014.

⁶⁸ Idem.

⁶⁹ R., Nyingcho, Age 50, Headmistress, Champion Primary school, Up Station Bamenda. 25/09/2014.

⁷⁰ Interview with Regina Nyingcho.

deteriorated in the whole region. People involved in acts of witchcraft and adultery and took refuge in the church. This also put to question the empowerment strides propounded by religious authorities.

The Catholic on their part opened up vocational training centers such as Girls Vocational Training Centers at Nkar, Njotten and Shisong in Nso', where they had continued the work initiated by the Germans during their colonial experience there.⁷¹ A Nursing School owned by the Tertiary Sisters at Shisong equally trained nurses of both sexes. The story of Nso' Women Cooperative was therefore one of such Non-Governmental initiative, which went a long way to improve on women's lot. This cooperative bought and distributed palm oil to women groups all over Bui Division from the late 70s to the early 90s. Meanwhile, the Tertiary Sisters resident in Shisong and Nkar went round in schools around Bui to educate adolescent girls on basic hygiene and some cookery lessons. At the Girls Vocational School, which were found in almost all Catholic Parishes in the region, girls were taught home craft and sewing. Nevertheless, as far as women emancipation was concerned, the Catholic Church was far behind, as the women during nuptial blessing were always cautioned of the necessity of being submissive for the marriage to be considered a good one. As such most men took advantage of the situation to continue to dominate women even at their own detriment.

The Muslims constituted a significant population of the Western Grasslands. This group migrated into the area around the nineteenth century. Through the jihads of the nineteenth century, the Fulanis also settled in the region having their language as Ffulde. The strides towards empowering the Muslim women have taken a different dimension as compared to the Christians. This is due to variations in the economic roles prescribed by Islam and for the fact that they are a homogenous group.⁷² The main strategy that most stakeholders have taken first is the education of the children in general and the girl child in particular. This is because the type of secluded life lived by the Muslims kept most of them away from formal schools. To this effect, the Muslim Associations in partnership with NGOs like Plan Cameroon International have helped in the provision of infrastructure for some of the schools in Muslim settlements. The case of Sabga was a good example.⁷³ Again, a great number of the Muslims have a complex as they feel disadvantaged. As such, the Muslim

elite encouraged the creation of associations for the sharing of knowledge on pertinent issues such as education on HIV-AIDS. It was hoped it would go a long way to empower the women who remained the most vulnerable. Meanwhile MBUSCUDA, a Mbororo Youth and Development Association was also doing a laudable work to help empower young Mbororo girls.

The North West Region in general harboured over thirty-four NGOs both local and international at the time of this study. Of these thirty-four, about twenty-five were based in Mezam Division.⁷⁴ One of such NGOs, which made significant strides to empower the women, was the North West Regional Fund for Mutual Health (NWRFMH). Its activities were felt in the health sector.⁷⁵ In the health sector, programs that sought to enhance women's control over their entire health care in general, reproduction and sexuality in particular were carried out in most divisions. This is because as already mentioned; women were only able to exercise reproductive choice if they concealed their decisions from their partners. In fact, some were reluctant to raise the issue of contraception for fear of abandonment, accusations of infidelity or violent reprisals. In a division where the prevalence of HIV/AIDS rate was high, its prevention could not succeed without challenging power inequalities between women and men.⁷⁶

The NWRFMH charged with the promotion of mutual health organizations, an initiative of German-Cameroon, did a great deal in addressing the aforementioned issues. The activities of the North West Regional Fund for Mutual Health in the Bali Health District as an example were worth examining. The population of Bali Health district was mostly agrarian with subsistence farming being the main occupation. There were no industries though 15% of the population was involved in the sale of manufactured goods for construction and household items as well as foodstuffs. There was an urgent need of improve access to health care, especially for women who were the most vulnerable.⁷⁷

Statistics revealed that 40% of the sick people did not get medical care due to lack of money, 05% of patients hospitalized were unable to pay their bills, 30 % of those consulted by a medical doctor were unable to medication and many families mortgaged property in order to treat their sick ones.⁷⁸ To redress this disturbing situation, the NWRFMH in collaboration with the Bali district hospital

⁷¹ The GVS at Shisong, was intended to train girls on home craft by the Germans, but its syllabuses were improved later on after Independence and girls who graduate from there could write GCE Subjects.

⁷² M., Nnoko, Age 38, Environmentalist, Bamenda, 20/10/2014.

⁷³ Idem.

⁷⁴ Master Plan for Sustainable Development-North West Province, 2000, HELVITAS, p.34.

⁷⁵ M., Njamnsi, Aged 54, Philanthropist, Bamenda, 10/12/2014.

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Report for the creation of MHO in the Bali Health District; July 2005 p.6.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.8.

and other five health centers embarked on a mobilization scheme, which saw the registration of hundreds of members with a token fee of one thousand francs per household and three hundred francs monthly for an individual.⁷⁹ The convention with the health institutions had the following description: To offer to members of Mutual Health Organization services such as consultations, deliveries, hospitalizations and surgeries and beneficiaries had to pay twenty-five percent of the cost of benefits and MHO seventy-five percent.⁸⁰

The Bali Health District, with a population of 65 659 of which fifty-four percent were females, greatly benefited from the assistance given by the NWRFMH. Since the vulnerable persons in most cases were women, it went a long way to empower them financially. The outcome was an increase access to health care with women playing leading roles.⁸¹ Apart from the North West Regional Fund for Mutual Health, the Non-Governmental Organization NTANKAH also contributed enormously towards the empowerment of women in Mezam Division.

The creation of NTANKAH was not without Goals. NTANKAH Women is a Common Initiative Group based in Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. It was created in 1996 and registered in 1997 under the Cameroonian law on Cooperatives and Common Initiative Groups. "Ntanhah" means "Hill of light." The members chose this name because they wanted to serve as a beacon or light house for other women groups, to lead them from the darkness of marginalization, dependency and underdevelopment to the light of emancipation, mutual support and self-confidence of women working hand in hand in progress and development in typical African community spirit.⁸² In brief, the mission of NTANKAH Village Women was to contribute and support the efforts of the Cameroonian government in improving and enhance the welfare of women in general and members in particular as well as ensuring livelihoods, human rights and capacity building, to increase their choices and self-esteem as well as promote the long term capacity of women to deal with development actors.⁸³

This Non-Governmental Organization was affiliated to other international organizations. As such, Ntanhah village women of Bafut was a member of: HUIAIROU Commission, a global membership and

partnership coalition that empowers women organizations to enhance their community development practice and to exercise collective political power at the global level, Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS International), White Ribbon Alliance, and Women Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR), Alliance of Home Based Care Givers, and Mother Center International Network for Empowerment (MINE).⁸⁴ All of these worked to better the conditions of women from deplorable customs and traditions in the study area.

Structural wise, there were two major organs in the year 2000: that is, the General Assembly and the Governing Board. NTANKAH operated through a General Assembly, which was the highest organ and decision-making body. It defined and formulated policies of NTANKAH. The Governing Board implemented strategies and programs and at the same time supervised and evaluated the work of members, staff, volunteers and resource persons

involved in programs, projects and activities.⁸⁵ The strategic program of NTANKAH, among others, included the following; Promotion of universal rights to education of girls and children, entrepreneurship, micro finance and livelihood development, Women's land, water, property, inheritance and settlement rights were the targeted areas. Also, promotion of environment, agriculture and livestock, Community response to HIV/AIDS and maternal health care, access to women and adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights and response constituted the next priority and lastly, social mobilization and community and civil society development.⁸⁶

The fundamental values included Community mobilization, networking with partners, perpetual innovation and construction, promotion of local-to-local dialogue, quality of service, clientele rights and development based approach, spirit of volunteerism, openness and tolerance, gender equity and equality, mutual respect, non-discrimination, solidarity, dialogue, commitment and hard work, and good governance.⁸⁷ The major partners and mandate at the national level were: Cameroon Grassroots Women Educational, Economic and Social Advancement (CAGWEESA), UNDP Cameroon, the Regional Delegation of Social Affairs, Regional Technical Group for the fight against HIV/AIDS, Regional

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.9.

⁸¹ Interview with Njamnsi.

⁸² *The Entrepreneur*, Number 88, 2011. p.4.

⁸³ World Bank Atlas, 1992, Fact sheet: Cameroon - Women, agriculture and rural development Available in www.fao.org/docrep/.../V9319E00.htm Accessed 24/11/2014.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ World Bank Atlas, 1992, Fact sheet: Cameroon - Women, agriculture and rural development Available in www.fao.org/docrep/.../V9319E00.htm Accessed 24/11/2014.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Smith. D., *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, McGraw-Hill Companies, 2005. p.7.

Delegation of Women Affairs.⁸⁸ The NGO was funded by: UNDP Cameroon, Dordrecht – Bamenda Foundation from Holland, Global Fund for Women, Virginia Gilder Sleeve International Fund, and Huairou Commission. There was also Positive Action fund for Children UK and philanthropic individuals and Families.⁸⁹

The major Achievements were, creation of Grassroots Women Network (CAGWEESA), creation of Cameroon Home Based Care Alliance (CAHBCA), creation of an Association of People living with HIV/AIDS (APLWHA), encouraged some traditional rulers to go in for Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT), and empowerment of PLWHA on micro finance schemes.⁹⁰ Projects in the pipeline included: Group farming and livestock production, Home Based Care to care and support Organization for Voluntary Counselors and PLWHA; Information, Education, Communication (IEC) for Prevention and Communication for Change of Behaviour (CCB) on HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancies, and high risk abortions, Support to OVC and widows and HIV positive persons, Support and promotion for universal right to basic primary education of OVCs; Establishment of a Youth for Change and Empowerment program (Youth Force), Grassroots women equal land, housing and inheritance rights within the framework of MDG3, Sensitization and mobilization and education of grassroots communities, Marriage Registration and establishment of Birth Certificates to vulnerable persons, para legal training and test litigation, Local-to-Local dialogue, Micro finance schemes, Environmental protection and Soil Conservation.⁹¹

These Organizations operated four basic programs. At the level of field implementation, these programs were integrated to address the needs of the most vulnerable in a holistic manner. Priority was given to HIV/AIDS and the direct target groups; children infected and affected with HIV/AIDS, People Living with HIV/AIDS especially the women. Intervention services, promoting the empowerment and involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS, care and support (community and home based). Positive living and positive prevention, anti-stigma and discrimination awareness, socio-economic impact, mitigation and coping mechanisms, nutrition and psychosocial support, Human Rights, advocacy and networking; education, information development and dissemination.⁹² The Method and Approach used in realizing their objectives were among others; mainstreaming the greater involvement and

empowerment of people living with HIV/AIDS, experience sharing and storytelling, workshops and seminars and entertainment in the NWR.⁹³

VI. CONCLUSION

The promotional bodies (the state and civil society organizations) expressed their interest in promoting women's integration into the development process and improving the women's situation. In spite of the efforts towards empowerment, the road was not all that smooth as resilient customs continued to hamper the progress of women, especially married ones. These joined efforts of national and international stake holders went a long way to galvanized women empowerment in the socio-economic and political domains. But most of these were centered around the region's capital and surrounding divisional headquarters, while some of the institutions for human rights were based mainly but in the regional capital of Bamenda. For example, the human right commission office whose services were only recently extended to the region, as many abuses stemming from customary laws and or tradition, continued to flourish in the rural areas and even in urban areas unperturbed. This situation did not augur well for the development of women who would have stood side by side with men in development of their families and the region at large. The government therefore has to extend her institutions to the sub divisional areas for observatory and indictment purposes in rural areas where abuses are bound. This way she will succeed in eradicating the ills which hinder the progress of women due customary tenets.

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⁸⁸ Ibid., p.8.

Justice James Tebo, "Women and Cultural Development in Cameroon", Available in www.tffcam.org/foundation/women.htm, Accessed 24/11/2014.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ursula Grant *et al.* *The Chronic Poverty Report 2004-2005*, University of Manchester, 2005. p. 5.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

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