

ALTERNATIVE NGO REPORT

On the Situation of Discrimination Against Women relative to Article 10
of the CEDAW Convention in Cameroon

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of the

Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against
Women (CEDAW)

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for

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Relative to the Combined Second and Third Periodic Reports

of

Government of Cameroon as a State Party to CEDAW.

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On 23rd August 1984 when Cameroon ratified the “Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women,” the Cameroon Government committed itself to implement the 30 Articles of this convention. Among them is Article 10 which calls on

State Parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular, on a basis of equality of men and women.’

This report will provide information in some detail regarding what the government has done so far and what, in our experience, still needs to be done.

10 (a)the same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories, both in rural as well as urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher education, as well as in all types of vocational training;

Cameroon is a country with diverse ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, the reasons for fewer girls than boys attending schools can vary from area to area or tribe to tribe.

Many parents, mostly in rural areas, still do not as easily allow their female children to go to school as their male children. They prefer girls to remain with them to help with domestic chores or to send them away for early marriage. In Moslem communities, parents still follow the tradition of plaiting of hair, Since plaiting is forbidden in the Anglophone part of Cameroon, they will find it very difficult to allow their girls to go to school if it means cutting the hair. A similar problem exists in the north of the country where it is not yet the norm for female children to be registered and be issued a birth certificate. As a birth certificate is a necessary condition for public exams and as the girls lack this, parents do not see the need of their daughters attending school if there is to be no public examination. Today the government of Cameroon and some NGOs are aware of this and much effort is being made through sensitisation programs to bring about a change.

With regard to girls having the same opportunity for vocational training as boys, both sexes are given the same opportunity. The education is both formal and informal and many such vocational schools have been opened in both urban and semi-urban areas.

However, there is still disparity at the expense of women in the provision of opportunities and facilities. Vocational schools for girls only provide them with those opportunities that will not empower them adequately financially and most subjects or courses revolve round their traditional role as women: sewing, hairdressing, catering,

etc. These professions do not provide opportunities for them to enter the job market as these fields are already saturated.

Technical and vocational training must be combined with basic marketing and 'entrepreneurship' that will make young women self-sufficient and able to provide for both their own and their families' needs. In most vocational and training schools, practical work is insufficient because of lack of material, equipment and generally poor facilities. The number of teachers is often insufficient and there is a significantly higher percentage of male than female teachers. Further, insufficient finance is allocated to technical and vocational education and even then priority is given to male technical and vocational schools than to those of girls.

We commend the efforts of the government which has opened many primary and secondary schools in rural areas as a response to parents' fears of sending female children to urban and semi-urban areas and exposing them to sexual exploitation or abuse by caretaker families. These schools have been opened in many small villages in the remoter areas of Cameroon's vast expanse and should enable children to attend school in their own local area under the care of their own families. In some areas this has improved the gender gap in enrolment in both primary and secondary schools but there is still a long way to go.

In rural areas even though early marriages, plaiting of hair (as in the Anglophone part of Cameroon) and patriarchal tradition posed an obstacle to the educational possibilities for women, the Government, in collaboration with NGOs, like 'PLAN INTERNATIONAL, CAMEROON', MBOSUDA (Mbororo Social and Development Association) and others, continued to offer sensitization programmes and thus enabled more parents to become conscious of the need for female education. The problem now is that poor structures, limited and unmotivated staff, lack of teaching materials and little or no recreational activities seriously limit the effectiveness of these efforts. In addition, sexual harassment of female students by male teachers continues to be a major problem at all levels of education including primary school and so continues to discourage parents from sending their female children to school, preferring for security reasons to keep them at home.

During a meeting of the African Union in Yaoundé, African Head of States committed themselves to universal and free primary education and the years 1996-2006 were the education decade. Although we support this commitment, we question its effectiveness.

Our experience indicates that primary education is free only in theory because parents are still taxed to pay PTA Fees for school development and part-time teachers are employed and paid for by parents.

The classes are often very crowded (up to 100 and sometimes even more in one classroom). It is practically impossible for one teacher to effectively teach all the

pupils. This explains why some parents pay extra money to teachers to pay special attention to their children in school.

Again, because of inadequate teaching in school, parents deem it necessary to provide out of school reinforcement classes and employ teachers to teach their children in the afternoons and weekends in the home. Writing materials are not provided and teachers are not paid consistently so in reality it is unclear how effective is this theory of 'free education in Cameroon?'

It is not surprising that none of the children of leading officials attend these local and government-run schools or colleges. Most of their children attend private and mission schools that are expensive but have good results. It would seem that Cameroon has not yet been able to provide genuine universal and free primary education. To a greater extent than in the past, parents are aware, however, of the need to educate the girl child just like the boy child educated

Randomly increasing the number of schools opened throughout the country, although good in itself, is not enough. We make the following recommendations that can improve the effectiveness of this programme.

We recommend:-

- That all aspects of free primary education should be implemented in our government schools and a budget for materials, structures and salaries for teachers be allocated and paid.
- That a serious plan of enforcing the registration of ALL children at birth be implemented and a systematic programme of assuring that all children have a birth certificate be initiated.
- That nursery education be encouraged for all.
- That primary education beginning at 5 years of age should be obligatory for ALL children. Sanctions should be enforced for those not in compliance and keeping children at home for service to the family or exploitation for labour purposes. In regard to the latter, the government has supported a campaign called 'Red card for child labour' but it is unclear what its implementation has been. We call for following up on such ideas and ensuring their implementation.
- That teacher training standards be improved and include appropriate subjects for the 21st century such as human rights, justice issues, sex and gender education, and art.
- That incentives to encourage teachers to work in rural or isolated areas be offered.

- That subsidies in government budgets for various areas of education be awarded impartially with special emphasis on allocation to rural and isolated areas thus encouraging teachers to be ready to work through out the territory and not only seek urban posts.
- That the government improve the living standard of families to a realistic level. When this is done the provision of education will not be such a problem.
- That the posting of teachers be impartial and a proper division or programming of teacher placement be put in place whereby all schools must have an equal ratio of female to male staff.

10 (b)access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality; (for both genders)

We commend the progress that the Cameroon Government and the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education is making in this area and encourage them to continue. However, most gender activists have complained that female students only take subjects that ensure their continuing in their traditional roles as mothers and domestic servants. Specifically, in the field of science, a report commissioned by 'Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa' (FEMSA) carried out by 'Cameroon Women in Science' (CAMWOS), revealed that there has been significant improvement in the number of students who enrol to study science and maths. This is also in no small part due to the scholarship that is awarded to female students by the Cameroon Government and many other NGO and religious bodies who offer incentives and prizes in order to encourage female registration in these subjects

However as the FEMSA study showed, girls avoid sciences for the following reasons: the negative attitude of some science teachers who try to mystify science as a subject; the lack of appropriate teaching aids and functional laboratories, inappropriate syllabuses and teaching methods. In the course of research one female science teacher admitted that, even though she is part of the staff, when it comes to certain decisions about students, her ideas are not considered. The female student can best be encouraged if there are many more female staff in the science departments. Further, It is only in very few schools that good and well equipped laboratories are found. Often resources are allocated for these labs but they are diverted for private use. It is not uncommon to find teachers in public schools running their own private schools in town with resources meant for the public sector. All this accounts for inefficiency in most of our public schools.

In line with the same criteria and as a result of a persistent the cry for shared family responsibility in both private and public circles, subjects like, food and nutrition,

home management and child care are now an obligatory as part of the school programme for both genders up to form 3 of the secondary curriculum. However encouragement by male teachers that boys follow this curriculum is lacking as is the encouragement for girls to take science.

With regard to vocational and informal education discrimination is more pronounced between the genders. Sewing labs, hair dressing salons, restaurants and catering facilities are less equipped compared to the equipment provided for carpentry workshops, garages, etc. Girls are required to buy materials for their practical work. Since they are poor, they are unable to do so and cannot continue in these courses. In most schools, especially in private and mission schools, employment of female teachers occurs in small numbers because of the fear that the teacher will become pregnant during the course of the academic year. This would entail more expense for the school authorities as the government is often very slow to pay maternity leave and the schools need find resources to help the staff member. Equally, the inconsistency in the teaching of the programme due to the absence of the teacher on maternity leave creates a problem. Sometimes it is not even possible to replace a teacher during that period. The absence of female teachers discourages girls from persevering in their education as they do not see a positive future for them.

We recommend:

- That there be gender awareness sessions at all level in the educational ladder involving all the academic heads and chief executives of nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary education.
- that there be provision of employment for female science teachers after graduation with a view to providing female role models for girls to consider entering this field.
- That female teachers especially those in rural areas are motivated.
- That maternity leave is paid promptly.
- That there be a strict follow up of gender non-discrimination in employment opportunity especially in education.

10(c) *The elimination of any stereotype concept*

of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education take place by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, that textbooks and school programme be revised and new teaching methods be adopted.

The formerly held strict cultural views that girls

- were meant for marriage,
- are less intelligent and cannot reason,
- do not make good housewives if they are educated,
- should not , as women, have highly paid jobs,

- would have their brains disturbed by too much education,
- require too high a bride price if they are educated,

are fortunately, albeit gradually, being eroded. Most women have proven the contrary to be true and many NGOs, the 'Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family' as well as religious bodies continue to sensitise parents and others on these issues. There are, however, some disciplines both in the formal and informal sector where girls and women are still not accepted. These include mechanics, bricklayers, electricians, carpenters, metalworkers and others that have traditionally been seen as a male domain. The few women who persevere in these studies need to be encouraged and given jobs in such fields after completion. The problem with such female students is that they are often under estimated and at times ridiculed. Males are often preferred in these the job because it is believed they are not appropriate for a woman. This continues to widen the gender gap in education as many female students are discouraged. It is equally very rare to find instructors in such field that are accepting of females. As was pointed out above with home-making subjects being obligatory in secondary education up to 3rd year and also included in primary education, an increase in the number male teachers in these subjects needs to be encouraged to overcome gender inequalities. Fathers sometimes show themselves equal if not better in parenting. Therefore to encourage boys to take up these subjects in higher education will do much to breakdown the preconceived ideas re gender stereotypes.

We recommend:

- That greater sensitisation take place in the areas of gender stereotyping,
- That Incentives and motivation for those who enter fields outside those accepted by stereotypes,
- That women in the informal sector should not only be trained in jobs traditionally accepted but they also enter fields in which they are more likely to get employment.

10(d) *the same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants;*

While it is true that both the government and other groups promoting the dignity of women motivate female students as well as male students. In our experience today, the fear of being accused of encouraging gender inequality has meant that there is a slight priority is given to female students in some areas. However, there is often a significant gap between what is awarded and what has been budgeted. Funds are often diverted to the extent that by the time it reaches the student little or nothing remains.

We recommend:

- that steps be taken so that funds be handled honestly and with transparency so that they are properly distributed.
- that every step be taken to eliminate corruption in the education system (and practically every other section of our nations activities) as 'envelopes' are still the ticket for acceptance into many institutions of learning from nursery school up to the highest levels. We encourage the government to redouble its efforts to eradicate corruption from our national heritage if we are to succeed.
- That unbiased assessment of candidates be implemented especially with regard to gender.

10(e) *the same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women;*

This subsection challenges the aspect of adult and functional literacy programmes to reduce the gender gap in education. Through the Ministries of 'Women Empowerment and the Family' and 'Youth and Sports' (animation section) and through some NGOs a good number of such centres have been opened. For example, in Ngoketunjia sub division there were up to 47 adult literacy centres with a total enrolment of 1147: 1019 female and 128 male.

However, the opening of such centres is only a first step. A supporting structure, staff, and writing materials also need to be supplied. Each of the centres is supposed to follow the National Literacy programme but often they are unable to do so owing to a lack of resources. MBOSCUDA like many other NGOs run such centres but limited finances, poor structure, and little or no material discourages them and defeats the whole purpose of such centres. Many women in rural areas are anxious to learn but have no writing materials because of poverty. It is unclear where grants and aid that reaches the country for such projects have been diverted. HIPC projects have allocated funds for such centres but it has not reached the centres and there is a lack of transparency regarding where these funds have actually gone.

In addition, the number of trained instructors is not sufficient and again because of inadequate teaching facilities or even allocation of buildings, those who are there have become discouraged them and they leave for Yaoundé and something better. In most centres of about 80 adults there is only one instructor. Studies have shown that adult literacy to be well initiated needs personal and individual teaching as well as group work. The psychological aspect of teaching adults or even youth who have been marginalised is a very pertinent and important part of encouraging and building up confidence in those who have been traumatized and scarred by feelings of inferiority.

We recommend:

- That more teachers of adult literacy should be trained and motivated to remain in these programmes.
- That formation of these instructors should include psychological and social formation as well as gender issues. Women make up the greater percentage of students in these programmes.
- That sufficient teaching materials be provided.
- That a coherent syllabus for all Adult Literacy Centres should be developed and monitored
- That attitudes of self appreciation and dignity must be a fundamental part of the formation of these centres

10(f).....The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of a programme for girls and women who have left school prematurely;

When we examine the female enrolment rate at all educational levels, it can be seen that the enrolment rate is increasing but that the highest numbers of repeaters and dropouts are women. Factors contributing to this anomaly are

- untimely pregnancy,
- sexual harassment by male teachers and students,
- early marriages,
- poverty,
- domestic chores,
- HIV/aids,
- Need to care for sick members of family especially for those infected with HIV.

Concrete and strict measures must be taken to suspend any male teacher or student who makes a girl pregnant or harasses them sexually. This can be done by strict implementation of the laws already existing to protect women. Also we find that in some schools girls are dismissed when it is discovered they are pregnant. These girls find it difficult to come back after delivery. This pattern is very common particularly in private and mission schools. Many students at all levels are tempted to commit abortion in order to continue their studies. These abortions are carried out in insalubrious conditions and in many cases result in death. Males are not punished for their role in these pregnancies and can continue their own education with impunity.

There have been a growing number of programmes created to address the issue of female drop outs from the official education system but like the adult literacy programmes they are inadequate to face the real issues for these women. These programs, the facilities where they take place as well as the teachers recruited for them are often below standard. We believe that the philosophy, curriculum and ethos of such centres must lead them to provide an education that will allow the women to become employed and make them financially autonomous. This need is especially

great since many of the women become the heads of single- parent families with all the responsibilities entailed. For those who are academically able these programmes must allow for them to complete formal education and enable them to succeed in their final examinations and be able to present themselves for government recruitment exams.

We recommend:

- That the syllabus in both formal and informal educational sectors should include sex education that will help reduce untimely pregnancies and reduce sexual promiscuity that often leads to school dropout for girls.
- That girls who become pregnant be allowed to write their end of course examination and strict sanctions be imposed against male teachers and students who make girls pregnant or who harass them sexually.

10(h)Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.

There is an 'Active Plan in Education' to combat HIV but we question how effective this can be when the curriculum in the schools does not have a similar focus. Awareness campaigns are carried out but they are viewed by many young people as something that is exaggerated by adults and the restrictions of society. Promiscuity seems to be the norm and the exploitation of women as mere sexual instruments is rampant. The need for the implementation of this article should be a priority.

Mother and child care welfare services must be made available to women because poverty is the underlying cause of their low position in society. Poor living conditions leave women at the mercy of their partners who still in many cases see them as 'possessions' to be exploited rather than as an equal partner in a relationship.

The government does offer specific educational information to assist, advice and educate women in relation to their own well-being and that of their families. However, such education does not include the men. We believe that in order to be effective male participation should be required.

As a second point, we point out that endeavours to provide adequate family health programmes are undermined by a lack of governmental control over the media in every form. Starting from the television services there is no control of programmes being sent out for public viewing. Video clubs with the most crude and graphic pornographic material available is open to everyone at every moment and even in the remotest area where even the National electricity service has not reached a video club operates a generator to project such material where even the local dispensary cannot boast of such an appliance. Much of this material shows the

exploitation of women as sex objects. We believe that government has a role to play in promoting a positive image of women.

We recommend:

- That there be some control or censorship of the media, including advertising.
- That on video clubs, night clubs, and advertising for them be taxed substantially and such taxes used can help to fund the important health education programmes.
- That local councils and government take their responsibilities seriously in enforcing the legal requirements with regard to bars and the hours of drinking alcohol in public.
- That adult literacy centres be a forum for good and ethical information on ensuring the health and well-being of families, including programmes giving information and advice on issues pertaining to women and men for the care of their families.

Conclusions

The above discussion demonstrates that the Cameroon government although conscious of the need to close the gender gap in education still needs further efforts, particularly in the area of implementation of its programmes and policies.

The enormous number of rural female children at home in the compounds when others are at school is daily evidence that much remains to be done.

The alarming number of 11 – 14 year old girls who are pregnant demonstrates clearly the lacks in 'Family health programme'.

That there are inadequate or nonexistent buildings in rural villages where schools have supposedly been created reveals the lack of implementation for the physical establishment of such schools.

Parents who do not see a school building will certainly keep their girls at home rather than allow them to loiter unoccupied in areas where schools have been proclaimed.

The increasing number of female drop outs from general education reveals that our legislation still leaves much to be desired.

The discrepancy between budget decrees and material available for education purposes means there is poor control and that corruption is still too rampant in the system of Cameroon.

Since women play a key role in the development of society, and since an education system is integral in good Nation building, it is imperative that both genders are found on planning and development committees in equal proportion. This requires

equal opportunities for education for both men and women if women are to participate competently as citizens of Cameroon. One of the main problems is that policies are made but not followed up. Therefore if women are found at all levels in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of educational programmes, this will enable them to target the special needs of women. Inequality in education must be completely eliminated. Cameroon has made tentative steps at the planning and theoretical level but the tangible and final results still need to be worked out.

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