Culture and Role of Women's Leadership in the Cameroon Region

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Abstract

The topic of gender studies, especially regarding women's roles in politics, is becoming more prominent in academic discussions in Cameroon, particularly in the northern region. Although women make up over half of the population in the north, they mainly engage in politics as voters and supporters in political activities, especially concerning political leadership in this area. They handle most of the tasks related to mobilizing for campaigns. However, women in the north face numerous obstacles that hinder their full participation in political leadership. These challenges include restrictive cultural norms, unfair traditional laws, and a deeply divided household workload. This paper looks into the different social and cultural challenges that hold women back from fully engaging in political leadership and decision-making. Since democracy began in Cameroon, cultural obstacles, social restrictions, and religious limitations have made it difficult for women to enter political leadership roles.

Keyword: Leadership, Woman, Cameroon, Culture.

1. Introduction

Female leaders in Cameroon often face resistance due to the strong influence of patriarchal cultural norms that place men as natural leaders, while women are considered more suited to domestic roles. Gender stereotypes that view women as less competent or less assertive in decision-making also reinforce distrust in their ability to lead. In addition, women's underrepresentation in politics and institutions that do not support gender equality create structural barriers, while resistance from male-dominated political elites often marginalizes women from positions of power. These factors together create a challenging environment for women to take on leadership roles in Cameroon.

The corrupt practices of leaders in Cameroon, such as corruption, nepotism, and the use of power for personal gain, are often incompatible with women in leadership because women tend to be expected to meet higher moral standards and are seen as cleaner and more transparent agents of change. However, when women try to break into a system that is already corrupt, they often face additional challenges, such as intimidation, discrimination, or even violence, aimed at maintaining the male-dominated status quo. In addition, a non-inclusive political culture and lack of support from existing political networks make it difficult for women to compete in this unfair and unethical environment.

Prevailing gender norms usually assign women tasks related to home and care giving, sometimes preventing them from taking on public roles, especially in political leadership. Therefore, Vianello & Moore (2000) in they book argue that "*the reasons and excuses for women being excluded from public life stem from certain ideological and religious beliefs as well as philosophical ideas about 'natural' (or more recently, biological) differences and roles.*" This issue is particularly evident in areas like the northern region, where conservative religious and traditional practices are common. The challenges women encounter in their pursuit of political leadership in this region of Cameroon are partly a result of these factors. Other obstacles, including unequal access to quality education, the male-centered nature of society, stereotypes men have towards women in leadership, and the lack of role models, all contribute to the sidelining of women in the political arena in this area. These outdated customs continue to hinder women's participation in political leadership roles. This section looks into the various significant challenges women face during decision-making processes. The following initiatives aim to raise awareness among girls and women, particularly those who are the most disadvantaged and stripped of their basic civil rights in leadership roles, first under the guise of customs and traditions (I), and additionally because of social and religious barriers (II).

2. Support for Women Leadership Resistance

The presence of strong traditional ideas and beliefs has contributed to forming gender stereotypes. Because many people are still strongly connected to their customs and traditions, certain women believe and convey that top social positions are only meant for men, not for women. This has reinforced the notion that men are superior to women in society. Under the banner of tradition and custom, women encounter obstacles in political leadership (A), and additionally, some women are hesitant to participate in politics due to cultural reasons (B).

A. Cultural Resistance and Women's Leadership Views

In the Northern Area, it is seen that women are treated as if they are less important than men, leading to the widespread idea that women belong in the kitchen. The limited opportunities for women to take on political roles in Northern Cameroon is mostly because of the ongoing dominance of men in this culture. Additionally, women who want to participate are not supported by their community and often face many insults from others, which causes them to be labeled and judged by men and even by other women.

1. The existence of patriarchal culture

The presence of patriarchy in this area of the country restricts women's opportunities to seek political leadership. Walby describes patriarchy as explained by Walby (1990) that's *"a system where social structures and practices allow men to dominate, oppress, and take advantage of women, putting women in a lower position than men."* From a sociological viewpoint, patriarchy is an established system where men hold the main power and take on leading roles in politics, moral guidance, social advantages, and owning property, which is seen in this region. Within the family setup, fathers possess power over women, and to put it simply, Arowolo (2010) in his study represents the *"dominance of men and submission of women."* This clearly makes it quite challenging for a woman to compete publicly for political leadership against men. Male dominance refers to *"a situation where men have significant access, though not always exclusive, to the most valued activities in society, which allows them to have control over others"* (Ernestine, 1975). Therefore, women are often overshadowed by men in almost all areas, except in the home. The practice of patriarchy has been around for a significant time. Although it has remained unchallenged until recently, it still hasn't fully vanished from our lives.

The problem of giving men more social power than women has entered public discussions. Evidence from the Northern Region shows that society is influenced by a system where men are dominant and women are expected to accept their lesser roles. This belief system suggests that women should stay at home and are not allowed to make choices or participate in public events, like political campaigns. In rural areas, it seems unimaginable for men to accept women being involved in politics or seeing them as leaders. Bari (2005) in a report about women's exclusion from formal politics, describes this scenario as tied to a long-standing tradition, not a new development. Historical evidence highlights that, like in many societies, male dominance was both a belief and a reality, with the public arena, which is considered the most important, reserved for men. Women were seen as belonging to domestic life (Catherine, 1997). The belief in male superiority functions at the cultural level, causing a gap in social and political opportunities between men and women. Before colonial times, Elizabeth (1992) pointed out that patriarchy relied on an extensive family structure, which placed women in private roles and regarded them as property of their families.

Conditions in this region, similar to many places in Africa, enforce a dress code particularly for Muslim women. One observer comments by Kivoi (2014) argue that *"women are not supposed to talk to men in public as it is seen as inappropriate."* This restriction severely limits women's dreams of becoming political leaders, as they cannot be seen or speak to people in public forums. Tundi in his study notes, "*leadership is traditionally seen as a male role, and many still believe that men are better leaders than women."* This shows just how much cultural views on leadership create barriers and exclude women from opportunities in political leadership roles. The ongoing dominance of patriarchal beliefs makes it difficult for women to take on political positions. Even though the constitution has allowed women to vote and run for office since the country gained independence in 1960, the traditional view that women belong at home has kept most of them out of politics, aside from a few who struggle to compete in the harsh political landscape. Current statistics reveal that there are only two women mayors, three women senators, and four women in parliament, highlighting the challenges women face in a field typically dominated by men. Many people in this region believe that only men are capable, qualified, and suited to hold political leadership positions. Norris & Inglehart (2001) explained about *"It has long been accepted that traditional beliefs against equality regarding gender hinder the political progress of women, though there has been little systematic evidence from different countries to support this idea,"* a commentator states, confirming the evidence noted during our research. This point is also echoed by Klein & Cole (1989) observer who acknowledged that, *"customary practices in Africa hold more power than oppression, stronger than laws, and even more influential than religion. Over time, these customs have blended into religious beliefs and have come to be viewed by their followers as commands from their chosen gods, whatever they may be."* This is a clear message that if attitudes do not shift, women in areas controlled by traditions will struggle to embrace modern ways because of cultural delays that keep them under the influence of men. The belief in patriarchy supports the sidelining of women in all areas of public life, especially in political roles. Akaranga & Ongong'a (2013) in they studied explained about *"Such situations of unfairness and inequality are thought to be sustained by cultural values, rules, and religious customs. These are some of the frequent puzzles that male-dominated societies have used to suppress and control women."* Many male-dominated communities in the North Region do not recognize the importance of equal rights for both genders because they are mostly patriarchal and often view gender equality as a threat to male power and control.

2. Stereotypes the women political leaders

The backlash against women achieving political positions can make other women hesitant to run for office, especially in this region of Cameroon where gender inequality and bias are prevalent. In this area, women engaged in politics are viewed and labeled as promiscuous, rebellious, or overly assertive, and often face negative stereotypes. It is common to see male political rivals take advantage of the perceived immoral behavior of these women, using insults directed at them publicly during election campaigns. Consequently, these women frequently experience public mockery and societal scorn from both men and women. The concept of gender stereotyping, which refers to assigning different characteristics, behaviors, or political views based on gender (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993), is a significant issue faced by women involved in politics in this region. Therefore Vianello & Hawkesworth (2016) argue that, *"By taking control of the public sphere for themselves, men relegated women to the private space, giving them tasks that men did not want to do (such as taking care of children, caring for the elderly, managing*

emotions, and maintaining social roles) and assigned them traits that men looked down upon…" Historically, men have held power in government and politics everywhere. Even today, women encounter significant challenges in reaching leadership roles in politics because of stereotypes; people in this area often believe that women cannot lead and view them as generally weaker than men. This is why "women have often been characterized as politically powerless, lacking motivation, naive, unseen, and reliant on men's knowledge" (Lansing & Baxter, 1980. As a result, they frequently rely only on their partners and lack the confidence to make independent choices. For many who uphold traditional beliefs, it is thought that O'Neil & Domingo (2016) argue about "in numerous situations, women who engage in politics and take on roles beyond the household challenge the expectations of what women should do". At the center of this study in sociology, gender is made by society and shaped by social forces. In reality, the strongest obstacle is the influence of cultural norms, particularly the ongoing stereotypes that define politics solely as a male domain and view politics as something unclean or corrupt.

In addition, while present-day democratic principles advocate for equal treatment of men and women in all areas of private and public life, this idea has become a major topic in political discussions. According to the basic laws and the CEDAW convention signed by Cameroon, both genders have the same rights and responsibilities concerning political engagement. However, outdated cultural customs and traditions continue to exist and hinder the efforts of the government and civil society groups to elevate the position of women in various fields. Violence against women is widespread, and there are no effective means for seeking justice. Since 1990, the waves of democracy that spread across the globe, particularly affecting Cameroon and especially the North Region, have provided women with chances to engage in politics along with newfound freedoms of association and expression. Sadly, there have been few female politicians, and they remained almost completely absent in positions like mayors and members of parliament until recently in 2007, due to the persistent traditional view that men are superior and the best suited for political roles. Historically, politics was regarded as a male responsibility. Vicky noted that, "historically, political scientists have viewed the actions of men in politics as standard, while women's actions have been studied as differences from this male standard. In this context, many false beliefs and stereotypes regarding women's involvement in politics have developed, such as the idea that women are inactive, uninterested in politics, and traditional, which feminist political scientists have tried to challenge (Ashfar 2005."

Evidence from research has shown that traditional beliefs about gender roles among voters can negatively affect female candidates, as men often prefer to vote for men, not wanting a woman to be their leader. The biases that female candidates experience, Goetz (2003) argue that leading to voters being unwilling to accept women in leadership roles, have been noted and are usually explained by referring to the broad idea of 'culture.' The acceptance of women in political positions is believed to depend on when women gained the right to vote. As a result, women running for office may attract fewer voters because society is hesitant to view women as political leaders, with many believing that their rightful place is at home rather than in public roles. These cultural aspects are connected to stereotype beliefs about what women can and cannot do in many communities, which often lead to the view that certain responsibilities should belong to men (Kivoi, 2014). The assessment of how well politicians perform their roles is frequently based on different expectations for male and female politicians. Any politician attempting to blur the lines between male and female roles may be seen as out of place and could become a target for ridicule from both genders (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007). The brave women who participate in politics are seen as outsiders and risk-takers by society. The existing traditional views about where women should be in public life remain strong and create significant challenges for women who want to get involved or make a difference (Nat, 2013). As a result, women interested in entering politics often face discouragement, as many individuals are unwilling to pay attention to them, and both men and women sometimes criticize female politicians during elections. A former deputy mayor of Garoua shared her experience of facing such negative treatment, saying, "I faced insults from men during election campaigns, but I stayed strong to avoid being thrown off balance by those trying to distract me; for me, women truly encounter challenges due to stereotypes during campaigns." Similarly, voters are hesitant to choose women over men, leading to a reluctance to support female candidates because of these outdated beliefs.

These generalizations impact how women are represented in politics, affecting everything from a woman's choice to get involved in politics, to how parties choose their candidates, to how people vote. Most importantly, there is a strong bias among both men and women that believes females are not capable of taking on leadership positions within the community. Instead, women are pushed into traditional domestic roles in society, which takes away their political voice and ability to lead. The widespread belief about women's involvement in politics, particularly in leadership roles, Atanga (2010) suggests that many view women as political outsiders who are not fit for political duties, but are still seen as valuable for their votes because they make up a significant portion of the population in the North Region. From a constructivist perspective, this reflects a socially created idea of gender.

B. Underappreciated Support and Presence

The way culture views women and their involvement in politics has created low self-esteem among those who want to seek political office. Additionally, seeing politics as something only men do discourages other women from backing those who want to engage in politics. Earlier studies have linked the shortage of women in political power to women being hesitant to pursue leadership roles. Moreover, there is limited support from other women and a lack of a united women's movement in this area.

1.   The Undervaluation of Women in Political Environments

The feeling of low self-worth is a mindset that develops among women, leading to their lack of presence in political roles. It is commonly accepted that many women, especially from families with limited income, show noticeable low self-esteem, which hinders their aspirations in political positions (Anonuevo, 1995). This societal issue has been defined and put into practice, thus supporting a system where men are seen as superior to women and where women are viewed as reliant on men. The effects of this mindset result in decreased confidence, a lack of drive to take on challenges, poor leadership morale, reduced assertiveness, emotional instability, and difficulties in managing crises. Ndjoume, the deputy mayor of Garoua, pointed out that obstacles like the difficulty of succeeding in male-led political groups, the effects of entering politics on family, well-being, or careers, and a lack of trust in their abilities to perform well are reasons why many women hesitate to seek office. Therefore, a lack of self-assurance is a key factor in why women are not adequately represented in official political roles, including in parliaments, ministries, or political organizations. Women may doubt their leadership skills possibly due to low educational levels, and the common belief that men should lead is simply a social idea for which there is no scientific evidence showing that women cannot be effective political leaders. As individuals, women are equal to men and possess the same capabilities, yet due to their fragile self-worth and the societal beliefs that instill feelings of inferiority, many women struggle to advocate for their rights. Research has shown that women excel as campaigners, organizers, and mobilizers of support, but fear and low self-esteem sometimes hold them back from engaging in politics.

Additionally, the traditions of many African nations, especially Cameroon and more specifically the North Region, have a negative impact on women in political roles. These traditions often make women believe they are not suited for politics. Pippa Norris supports this idea by stating that "*in societies that have old-fashioned views about women's roles at home and within the family, many women might hesitate to run for office, and if they do, they may struggle to get enough backing to succeed.*" The awareness of limited encouragement from others causes women's self-confidence to suffer, leading many to avoid attempting to pursue political positions, as they feel the odds are stacked against them. This pattern is typical in regions where cultural standards prevail, which is true for the area we are discussing.

In addition to being seen as without power, women often feel a sense of being lesser than others. An interviewee, Hadja Fadi, a council member, stated clearly that *"women are truly held back by a sense of inferiority caused by the traditions and norms in this area."* This situation makes it hard for women to consider running for political office, which is connected to cultural restrictions on women speaking in public or being in public spaces. Senator Didjatou Oumarou noted that *"political campaigns often require a lot of traveling, spending nights away from home, and even going to bars, which for women means interacting with men. These situations are not easily accepted by husbands in this community."* Women who want to seek political roles must think about the possibility of being labeled as 'immoral' or 'inadequate' as mothers and wives and facing social stigma. These thoughts, especially in a region dominated by Muslim culture, lead many women to avoid politics and any positions that draw public attention. This, in turn, reinforces the idea of women lacking power, both for those who want to participate and for those who will not support their peers in politics. Additionally, the early teaching of women's inferiority is a socially built norm referred to as *"habitus."* It becomes clear that *"on a collective level, habitus leads to the ongoing patterns and consistency we can see in the social world,"* passed down through generations (Bourdieu, 1973), instilling a sense of political inferiority in women from this part of Cameroon.

2.   Support From Various Parties Including Women

The limited or complete absence of family backing poses a significant obstacle for women who want to engage in politics in the North Region. In this society, politics is often viewed as a male-only domain, leading to the cultural belief that women wishing to enter politics must obtain permission from their husbands or male relatives before doing so. If they are denied this permission, their only choice is to abandon their political goals, and evidence shows that many husbands will likely refuse. This results in a lack of support for women who aspire to political roles. Consequently, many family members, particularly husbands, even those who are educated, do not permit their wives to take part in politics in the North Region. As Mr. Ousmanou stated, *"I will not permit my wife to be in public spaces for political reasons; her place is at home, and I do not allow her to go out without my consent, even if she wants to visit the market. In short, politics is not meant for women."* This illustrates that women in this area will rarely receive permission from their partners to pursue political leadership positions. Similarly, women who are financially disadvantaged and wish to hold political office often do not have the support from their families or finances necessary for success in politics.

Moreover, female political candidates in this area do not receive backing from other women in the political sphere, which presents a significant obstacle to their involvement in politics since a large portion of voters are women. Hence, women aspiring to take on political roles do not get support from peers because politics is often viewed as a "dirty job" for them and thought to be meant only for men. As noted by Tamale (1997), *"women are women's worst enemies."* It is sad that women from this area lack faith in the skills of other women to fulfill political roles, leading to a situation where those who want to stand for election do not receive assistance from their fellow women. For example, Fanta, a woman from a rural part of Pitoa, expressed, *"I won't vote for a woman because I don't trust their talents and capabilities as a leader, while I can vote for a man because they are more familiar with political tasks; women in politics won't make the right choices."* This comment highlights that women do not back their sisters when it comes to political matters. However, many women in the North Region mentally

associate politics with a negative stigma, seeing it as a *"dirty game,"* which leads them to view other women entering politics as arrogant and irresponsible, wanting to undermine them. Consequently, many women in this region shy away from politics to preserve their good reputations and not jeopardize their marriages, particularly for those who are married. Women who support other women in political contests often experience considerable push back, ranging from being shunned by other married women to being excluded from their families for younger girls.

3. Social Environment and Religious Views

Social customs and religious restrictions are ongoing obstacles for women who want to actively chase their aspirations and gain political roles in this community (the North Region). Access to education, or the absence of it, greatly affects a person's intelligence, ambitions, and beliefs in relation to politics. Thus, how a person is educated will influence who can serve in government positions; how those individuals are selected (or appointed); and how much authority and influence they possess, based on their educational background. Similarly, religious factors also shape how women are involved in politics within a particular society. In certain areas, specific interpretations of religious texts result in banning women from engaging in politics, confining them to domestic responsibilities. Under the guise of safeguarding, passing down, and enhancing the culture of the North Region, society has historically denied girls equal educational opportunities (A), and religious customs also act as a barrier (B).

A. Women's Educational Background

The education policy in Cameroon is intended to be fair and inclusive towards girls and women, but there have been clear differences in their involvement in the northern region over the last three decades. It is regrettable that "*when prevailing social norms prevent young women from receiving a complete education and shape their roles from an early age to exclude them from public decision-making, the number of potential women politicians significantly decreases.*" Additionally, there is a significant rate of illiteracy among women in this area (1), and they face challenges with weak political socialization (2).

1.   Majority of Women are Illiterate

The amount of education is a key factor that limits women's involvement in political leadership. This happens because for the past 30 years, not all women have received enough education, which results in them generally lacking knowledge about politics. Hansen (1997) in his research, pointed out that for women to make a difference in politics, they must be "*qualified and competitive candidates rather than just names on a list.*" Through education, young girls gain knowledge, discover their abilities, and utilize these to achieve personal growth and benefit both themselves and others. The Beijing Platform for Action states that "*many challenges remain for girls in accessing education due to traditional beliefs, early marriages and pregnancies, biased teaching materials, sexual harassment, and insufficient educational facilities that are safe and accessible.*" The differences in the education levels of females compared to males show that women continue to encounter obstacles in getting an education, which affects their political skills. To improve this situation, the author suggests creating a supportive educational and social environment where girls and boys, as well as women and men, are treated equally. This environment would promote reaching their full potential while respecting their freedom of thought, beliefs, and religion, and would ensure that educational materials present non-stereotypical images of both genders. Such changes could help to remove the reasons for discrimination against women and the inequalities between genders. From the experiences in the West, it's clear that education levels have a significant impact on how involved women are in politics.

For instance, Angela Merkel, who is the chancellor of Germany, has a solid education, and Helene Johnson Sirleaf, the previous president of Liberia, also possesses a reasonable level of education. These examples show that education plays a significant role in increasing the number of women in politics, as it promotes both personal growth and benefits the wider community and society. Even though the gap in gender enrollment for formal education has decreased over the last decade, inequalities continue, especially in higher education in this area. Boys have higher dropout rates, and women's literacy remains considerably lower compared to men's. Limited access to education stops women from gaining the skills and self-assurance needed to seek leadership roles. In Cameroon, while the education budget is growing, the education level for girls remains low in this part of the country. Despite the government's promise to offer free and mandatory primary schooling for all children, families with low income still struggle to pay for various fees and costs. Differences in how boys and girls are raised are connected to various cultural and geographical influences. Beliefs that favor sons, who are thought to continue the family name, have contributed to the oversight of girls.

Boys are favored when it comes to education, while girls often stop going to school after primary level due to early marriages or because they have to work in agriculture in rural areas. A research report from 2015 by the Cameroon government revealed that for every 100 boys who are in school, only 85 girls are enrolled. This difference in gender shows up in adult literacy rates, which were 64.8% for women and 78.3% for men in 2019. Generally, women from rural regions often do not speak French or English, making it hard for them to learn about voting processes or candidates, which is important for making good voting choices. Similarly, those women who do get elected must also deal with the issue of having the skills needed to fulfill their roles. Nowadays, it is clear around the world that having formal education is closely linked to being involved in politics for both women and men. Sadly, the obstacles of poverty and the cultural sidelining of girls, especially in rural areas, have restricted their chances for education. As boys are prioritized in formal schooling, many young girls drop out of school at the primary

level because families focus on marrying them off instead. Haoaua Mahamat states, *"the low level of education really stops women from engaging effectively and actively in political leadership, simply because they struggle to take notes and gather information during meetings."* Even though education has a small effect on the few women who lead politically in this area of Cameroon, having some literacy is still better.

Generally, the education level of women greatly impacts their involvement in making political decisions. American sociologists Burns et al (2001) state that education is a strong indicator of how likely someone is to participate in politics. Having formal education directly influences how women engage in politics, especially in leadership roles, because it enhances their communication abilities, broadens their knowledge, and helps them become more open to political ideas. Similarly, Putnam (2000) noted that education is crucial for everyone, regardless of gender, in political leadership, claiming that education is often the most significant factor in various social activities like voting and joining community groups. This shows that education is a key ingredient for women who want to pursue political leadership in this area. Traditional beliefs in this region often limit girls from finishing high school, which results in fewer chances for them to gain skills and develop talents related to political leadership. According to Fatime, a former deputy mayor, many women leaders in this area have not had the benefit of higher education. In this region, few women reach university; typically, only unmarried women are permitted to attend university while waiting for a potential partner. Because many women are kept out of leadership positions due to low education levels, their political goals are often stifled by a lack of political knowledge and skills. The authors argue that education provides critical knowledge and skills necessary for active citizenship. Through education, those who are well-educated gain the abilities to comprehend complex politics, keep up with political campaigns, and analyze issues and candidates (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Education is an effective tool for developing an individual's capabilities, while inadequate education and low literacy levels make it hard to access information and often reduce the confidence and skills required to participate in public life, whether at the village, community, local, or national scale (Oxfam, 2008). Therefore, poor education is a major factor contributing to gender inequality.

2. Information about politics that is not optimal

During the process of socialization, girls in this area encounter bias from the moment they are born. Jane (2008) in her book explained thats happens because women have been conditioned to believe that politics is not something they should worry about. Since very few have been engaged in political matters, they do not grow up wanting to be politicians or aspire to impact public issues. It can be described like this: *"Political socialization happens on both individual and community levels. On the community level, it is mostly understood as passing down cultural values."* Additionally, *"political socialization highlights the important learning experiences related to politics that an individual goes through."* The lack of effective political socialization among girls here serves as a hurdle to their overall participation in politics, especially in leadership roles. Similarly, the influence of family socialization also plays a role in keeping women out of politics. The inadequate political socialization that girls experience as they grow into women distances them from political topics. Fox & Lawless (2010) argue that *"This type of socialization fosters the belief that politics is a field meant for men, which can help explain why even educated women are much less likely than men to show interest in political careers."*

The practice of valuing male children more highly has a strong link to the traditional and Islamic laws in that area, which state that a son must take care of his parents and ensures that sons inherit twice as much property as daughters. Bourdieu (1973) notes that *"every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness."* This means that the current social structure in this community promotes gender bias in upbringing, training boys to become future leaders while preparing girls for motherhood. This traditional way of gender roles, described by Conover and Gray (1983) as a *"division of activities into the public extra-familial jobs done by the male and the private intra-familial ones performed by the female,"* has led to men taking part in public politics while women are confined to domestic life. The lack of political upbringing for girls in this area is an ongoing problem because socializing influences like family, friends, schools, mentors, and media put less emphasis on politically engaging women. The limited or failing political training of girls from a young age limits women's overall participation in politics, especially in leadership roles, in this region of Cameroon. As Melody Emmett (1975) puts it, *"the life passages of women are not sacramentalized, celebrated or even acknowledged."*

This shows the societal role assigned to women, starting from the time a girl is born and continuing into her adulthood, especially when compared to boys and the later roles men assume as leaders in various parts of life. The idea that women are meant for home-related tasks serves as an obstacle for them when trying to engage in politics overall and political leadership specifically. This is Tucker (1999) explained that many women are raised to be submissive, which makes them unaware of how to ask for help, whether it's financial or emotional support to run for office. Therefore, it is clear that society does everything possible to limit women's access to political leadership roles by teaching them mainly about domestic duties.

Furthermore, girls are often taught to accept their expected roles in society, which includes being a spouse and a parent. Thus, it is improbable that merely being female results in lower involvement in politics. Similarly, the author notes that many individuals, *"stress the importance of 'socialization' and particularly how children learn gender roles through mimicking, identifying with, and absorbing these roles"* (Oakley, 1972). This means that women adopting these social norms from childhood limits their chances of entering political leadership roles. Randall *(1987)* argue that *"the family is considered the main place for socialization,"* and since children typically spend more time with their mothers than with their fathers, it can be

ironically stated that mothers play a crucial role in their daughters' understanding of gender. So, it becomes evident that the extent of foundational political beliefs maintained by a person can differ based on the breaks they face during their political education at home. Consequently, women who are primarily responsible for raising daughters often lack the political experience due to insufficient exposure to political activities.

B. Religion and Women's Leadership

Religion serves as a significant source of cultural beliefs in many nations. Debates about the lesser status of women compared to men can be found in all major religions, and historically, religion has often been used to keep women out of social, political, or religious roles worldwide (Kunovich et al., 2007), as seen in this area of Cameroon. The beliefs, standards, and regulations linked to religion harm women in this region, justifying male authority and resulting in the sidelining of women. There are gender roles and social rankings in both Christianity and Islam.

1.   Christianity

Religious beliefs play a significant role in keeping women under constant control. Christianity is sometimes seen as a faith that supports male-dominated values in today's world. The idea of womanhood is shaped by gender-specific discussions that define it through the lens of women in Christian beliefs. This applies to our area of study where Catholicism is a main faith, along with some Protestant churches. Numerous scripture passages express the idea that men are superior to women. A clear example is found in these biblical lines: *"So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and he brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:21-22)*. Because of this, Christianity presents Eve as a secondary creation made from Adam's rib.

Additionally, it is believed that the roots of gender discrimination started because of their wrongdoings. In this religious context, women are often viewed as lesser than men, especially in matters related to leadership in both the church and political arenas in this area of the national framework. *"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I (Apostle Paul) do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner"61 (1 Timothy 2:11-14)."* In addition, as representatives of Christian beliefs, women are seen as guardians of family respect and as bearers of children, which is really just another way to control their lives. Under these circumstances, how society views womanhood is linked to both Catholic and Protestant beliefs, which place women in the family structure based on the idea of the perfect wife. The teachings and principles of many religions are biased against women and support a male-dominated system, as they consistently aim to oppress women.

Various Christian denominations and their communities influence how women view political involvement both personally and within society. Following this idea, not just personal religious beliefs but also the level of faith in a community can affect how much women engage in politics. Some religious teachings discourage women from being actively involved in politics and holding leadership roles, with examples including Born Again Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, to name a few.

The Catholic and Protestant faiths are the most widely practiced Christian religions in this area, having the largest number of followers. These faiths are steeped in male-centered traditions, as shown by the leadership of Pastoral Councils being held by male members of the parish. In these religions, similar to many others, there is an idea of the perfect woman who is fully committed to her husband and household, focusing on home-related tasks. While political involvement is not part of their religious focus, this is slowly changing as religious beliefs evolve over time. Hunter states, *"Clergymen still refer to the teachings of Paul and the early church fathers to sanction the enduring exclusion of women from positions of power in their churches. The Bible still lends support to those seeking to justify the idea that women have no roles other than wife and mother."* This quote highlights the key teachings of Christianity, where gender roles are clearly defined, leading men and women within the faith to have different responsibilities laid out by their beliefs. Women are expected to engage in home-related duties like raising children and managing the household, while men are viewed as the main providers for their families. As a result, men often have more opportunities to participate in public roles and pursue political leadership, which is the focus of this discussion.

2.   Islam

In Cameroon, the practice of Islam acts as an obstacle for women aiming for political leadership. A field survey indicates that the religion restricts women from holding high-ranking roles like the presidency, although they may occupy lesser positions. Some people noted that Islam expects women to remain at home. It is commonly noted, particularly within Islamic governance, Nomita (2004) argue that *"Muslim women typically encounter significant pushback and are frequently criticized by religious extremists, arguing that Islam does not support women as leaders of the state"* (Brill, 2005). Therefore, Islamic teachings firmly prohibit women from engaging in certain political activities, including public speaking, that could boost their political goals.

Religious obstacles related to stereotypes often show Muslim women as either exotic, oppressed, and nearly completely dominated by men in Islam, or as supporters of Islamic values and the rights given to women. In a region heavily influenced by Muslim culture, where the Islamic faith is deeply embedded in public consciousness and adopted as a traditional conservative viewpoint, the strict religious laws and interpretations further strengthen the exclusion of women from political leadership roles. The Islamic legal framework known as Sharia is also present in nearby Nigeria.

This religious legal system known as sharia was kept mainly to oversee family matters (Rouhana et al., 2003). There are many historical, cultural, and social traditions present in this community. Muslim women are frequently left out and face discrimination in political roles. Media representations of Muslim women being harmed by overly religious men suggest that these women lack the power to fight back against the misuse of religion. Research shows that very few women attain high-ranking positions in government, such as ministers. The partnership between conservative culture, religion, and tribal customs has led to a long-standing absence of women in public life, particularly in politics within this area. Throughout history, women in Islamic cultures have faced such discrimination and have had their freedoms and rights restricted. The social systems and political authorities in this region have justified the physical, legal, or mental oppression of women using religious reasons, creating a warped social understanding where Islam is seen as enforcing the subjugation of women. These beliefs are so deeply rooted in these communities that they are treated as the norm, and religious leaders often cannot or will not question them.

Additionally, the way Muslim women dress in this area makes it difficult for them to take on political roles.

This is due to the religious guidelines that require women to cover their entire bodies in public, with the exception that a husband may see his wife without her covering if they follow strict interpretations of Islam. As Boulanouar (2006) notes, *"in practical terms, this indicates that these parts of the body should not be revealed to anyone except the spouse (or, if needed, a doctor) and, for women, it relates to what must be concealed in public but not at home or with family members in a private setting."* The dress rules that some extremists enforce on women in this area restrict many of them from engaging in political leadership activities, which require public appearances for campaigning and meetings. Numerous husbands do not allow their wives to take part in politically related events, as being out in public means interacting with other men, discussing with them, and sometimes spending time together on political matters, which is often not accepted by many husbands.

Women are encouraged to *"dress in either a jellaba, which is a long robe, along with a veil, or a haik, a large piece of cloth they use to cover themselves, leaving only their hands, feet, and eyes visible"* (Fadwa, 1999). During our discussions with several women who wear these outfits, we found that many of them lack an identity card, and some do not even have a birth certificate. The reason many women do not have an identity card is that their husbands will not allow them to remove their veils for the passport photo that is required for the card. This reflects the Islamic belief that says *"believing women should keep their eyes down and maintain their modesty; they should not reveal their beauty or ornaments except what is naturally visible; they should cover their chests with their veils and only show their beauty to their husbands"* (Badawi, 1980). The dress code set by religion makes it harder for women to take on political roles, as their husbands often do not accept their public appearances, and due to certain beliefs, women lack the crucial documents needed to pursue a position in political leadership (Morna et al., 2002). Additionally, Islamic fundamentalism is another reason that leads to the lack of visibility of women in political roles. This type of religious fundamentalism is seen as a movement that actively seeks to defend itself from what it views as the negative impacts of modern society. It is a controversial, growth-seeking, and rigid movement that has deep cultural roots in the area. Those who follow Islamic fundamentalism view the Holy Qur'an as unchanging and sacred, striving to return to a nostalgic version of Islam from the 7th Century during the life of Prophet Muhammad. Although this movement is not uniform, Islamic fundamentalism in this region adheres to a specific and limited set of beliefs. These fundamentalist movements arise from the fear of *"Western"* cultural takeover. In this part of Cameroon, Islamic fundamentalists often commend and honor women for their roles as mothers, yet in all other capacities, women are depicted as lacking and subordinate. Islamic teachings consequently severely restrict women from participating in certain political activities and public speaking, which could help them pursue their political goals.

Once more, the Islamic belief system promotes the idea of young girls marrying early. This practice makes it difficult for women to take part in political leadership in areas where Islam is the main religion. The family is often described as the 'basic unit' of Islamic society, and women are seen as the 'support', the 'goddess', and the 'queen' of the home (Sheehan, 1992). In Islam, it is common for girls and even boys to be encouraged to marry at a young age. Girls typically marry soon after they start their periods, as marriages are often arranged before they even experience their first menstruation. This situation does not support the political freedom of women because their faith prepares them to be good wives at home rather than leaders in politics, a field that is typically seen as meant for men only. Furthermore, the writer Vianello & Hawkesworth (2016) offered thoughts on how religion, especially Islam, affects women's political roles as shown by Fatima Mernissi in her book Sultanes oubliées: les femmes chef d'Etat en Islam (1990). She points out that religious beliefs and nationalism often push aside the issue of women and their involvement in politics.

The influence of religion is clearly seen as a barrier to women's political leadership globally, and this is especially true in this area of Cameroon. In summary, whether it is Christianity or Islam, the idea that women are lesser than men is often highlighted in religious teachings (Halder, 2004). This is evident in both the holy Bible and the Koran, where it is mentioned that woman comes from man's rib, suggesting she is inferior to him. As a result of this religious belief, women are often excluded from religious leadership roles (for example, in Catholicism, women cannot become priests, and in Islam, they cannot serve as imams). Such discrimination impacts the political arena and political leadership, which is largely controlled by men who generally believe that God has given power only to men. As a result, women are pushed into home roles dictated by religion, such as being a suitable and obedient wife.

This issue is not just local; the writer supports this idea by stating that views about women being inferior to men exist in all main religions and that, historically, religion has been used to keep women out of various areas of social, political, or religious life across the globe (Kassa, 2015). This means that the discrimination women experience in politics due to religious beliefs in the North Region is not a unique situation.

4. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to look into the role of women in political leadership in the northern region. Various questions about the reasons that stop women from entering political roles led to a deeper understanding, revealing two key areas for analysis. We started by exploring social challenges that keep women from participating, which is essential for their entry into political positions, while also considering cultural obstacles that still hinder women's political leadership in this part of Cameroon. Nonetheless, given the current state of affairs, there is still a lot of work needed to strengthen women's political power.

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