

Nov-2006

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## Recommended Citation

Nana-Fabu, Stella (2006). An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 148-162.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/11>

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## **An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon**

By Stella Nana-Fabu<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The Cameroon woman has for long been the economic backbone of the nation, yet she remains largely marginalized in society generally and in the economic sector in particular. The cumulative effects of the interplay of gender discrimination of traditional African and Western colonial as well as neo-colonial systems on the general status of the Cameroon woman has been enormous. As this paper reveals, in modern times, more Cameroon women have become more dependent on men economically than in pre-colonial or traditional times.

It is true that modernization has wrought some good for Cameroon women, but this article shows that the ills of modernization far outweigh the good wrought by modernization in Cameroon. The end result is that in modern Cameroon women occupy economically precarious positions at the lower echelons of the socio-economic scale. Women's limited access to and lack of control over resources such as education and bank loans that are more readily available to Cameroon men has led to the further decline of women's economic status in modern Cameroon. The vast majority of Cameroon women, regardless of educational level, find themselves in a disadvantaged position in the economic sphere. The overwhelming historical evidence presented in this paper is testimony to the above fact. In turn this pattern has had grave consequences for the country's overall development.

*Keywords:* Cameroon, women's status, economic restructuring

### **Introduction**

This article presents a historical overview of the various factors that have led to the relative decline of the economic status of the Cameroon woman in contemporary society. It seeks to explain the complex origins of gender discrimination in the Cameroon economic system. Tracing the economic status of the Cameroon woman from pre-colonial, colonial to modern times, this study focuses on the inextricable links among factors such as colonialism, industrialization, modernization, urbanization, certain African cultural expects, capitalism and dependent development, and the relative decline of Cameroonian women's economic status. These factors dramatically changed the traditional Cameroonian woman's role in both the public and private spheres and culminated in women's relative debased economic status in modern times.

The main findings are 1) during pre-colonial times, Cameroon women through their economic power were able to exert considerable influence on matters within and outside the household, and their status was generally higher; 2) European colonialism brought about radical changes in Africa as expressed in the introduction of new

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capitalistic structures and institutions in traditional Cameroon society. This altered the whole fabric of society and in the process seriously undetermined women's economic status. For example there was a breakdown of the traditional African family structure. This transformed the social and economic functions of the traditional Cameroon family and had serious consequences on the traditional division of labour. Men were continuously being integrated into the cash economy; while women continued subsistence farming and the traditional household duties without the advantages of the new agricultural techniques and equipment; 3) Neo-colonialism and underdevelopment are still plaguing the nation. This is manifested in the exploitation of women's labour in all spheres of the capitalist system operating in Cameroon. Women continue to perform domestic tasks as well as tasks outside the home, without any boost to their status. Most women are subsistence farmers. Others are self-employed in the informal sectors as dressmakers, petty traders, domestic servants and prostitutes. Their chances of acquiring substantial wealth are slim, thanks to their lack of access to critical resources such as bank loans and modern technology. Overall today, more Cameroon women are economically dependent on men relative to pre-colonial times.

The purpose of this paper is first to analyse capitalist transformation of the Cameroon economy which has resulted in "class" divisions with often devastating implications on women's economic status. For example it examines the proletarianization process in Cameroon, with special emphasis on how women have been drawn into this process in ways that lead to the further exploitation of their labour power and leaving the vast majority of them poorer than ever. The capitalist enterprise in Cameroon is dominated by foreign capital with a small indigenous capitalist class made up predominantly by males who serve as intermediaries in the economy and state institutions to maximize profits for foreign capitalists. In an ambiguous system where capitalist enterprise often coexists with non capitalist forms of production, the vast majority of Cameroon women find themselves at the lowest levels in the occupational hierarchy mainly in areas of subsistence agriculture petty commodity production, petty commerce and mainly low-level clerical jobs. For example it is not uncommon in Cameroon to hear people making fun of a man who works as a secretary in an office. Often they will say things like "*eh... tu fais le métier des femmes*" or "you are doing a woman's job". This paper therefore analyses and seeks ways in which the Cameroon economy could be restructured to enable women, especially poor women to have control over conditions of their production in subsistence agriculture or in artisan activities as well as other activities in the public and private domains so as to make these activities more appreciated and more profitable for their general well-being. This calls for mutual help (relative to or if not more to that of pre-colonial times) on both production and domestic labour on their part and an enabling socio-economic environment provided by local and foreign institutions.

### **Data and Methods**

Given that this study is an analysis of the economic status of Cameroon women, both past and present, it is mainly a longitudinal study which uses social constructionism as its theoretical base (Corcuff 1995). In this light it is possible to see how Cameroonian women's economic status has evolved from pre-colonial times (before 1884) to colonial times (1884 – 1960) and finally in modern - post colonial times (1960 till presently). To

do this, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to collect data. In the former, data were mainly collected from books, journals, radio news, and newspaper clippings on pertinent aspects of the Cameroon woman's economic status. Some information on women's economic activities in modern Cameroon, the positions they occupy in the economic sector, their literary status and their employment status was also obtained from the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Economy and Finance, Employment and Social Security. Participant observation was also used as the author drew upon personal experiences, interviews and focus group discussions on women's economic status in urban and rural settings in Cameroon; as well as field work in urban and rural areas.

Data collection was also done by the use of questionnaires and interview guides in formal and informal settings. The respondents in the ministries were usually public officials who were specialists on women's issues and development. They were usually persons who had 14 or more years of education and therefore had a graduate degree or a higher diploma with a specialization in either gender studies or development. School officials also provided useful information.

Data in informal settings came from ordinary citizens at social gatherings such as in churches, church associations, tribal development associations and health centers, from teachers, university students, people in bars and eating houses, female and male associations and even in people's houses.

The ages of respondents generally ranged from 12 – 80 years of age. In addition women's associations provided a useful source of information of the prevailing gender role stereotyping in Cameroon; that is, the notion that the private domain (household and other low-paying, low prestige jobs) is exclusively a female domain; whereas the public sphere (high prestige, managerial and top decision making posts in the social, economic, and political domains) is a preserve for males. In all, 580 persons from the ten provinces of Cameroon were selected for this study using probability sampling.

The target group in this study consisted mainly of peasant women in the rural and urban settings of Cameroon. These are mostly women who depend on subsistence agriculture and very low-paying jobs for their livelihood. They usually constitute the most deprived classes of people, the have-nots, and they are the ones suffering most from the current economic downturn now plaguing the nation.

## **Findings**

### *Women's Economic Status in Pre-colonial Times (before 1884).*

#### *The Case of the Bamiléké-Bangangte.*

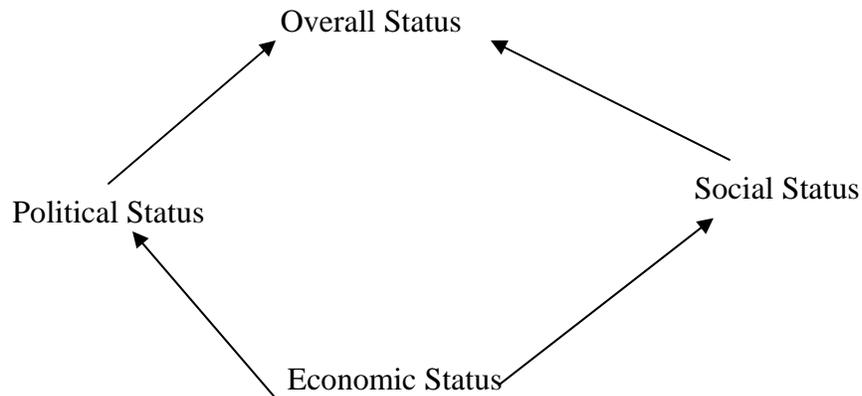
During pre-colonial times the Bangangte society was a subsistence agrarian society based on the female dominated household economy. There was little specialization of production. Producers relied heavily on a plentiful supply of land to provide for their subsistence. Methods of production varied in accordance with nature's dictates and were generally rudimentary.

There was little population pressure to force an intensification of land use. Also the volume of trade was so negligible that farmers were not forced to increase their output beyond the immediate needs of their tribe or family. In short, people lived outside of the money economy. Moreover, because women largely controlled subsistence

agriculture and the fruits of their labour, they exercised considerable social and political power and enjoyed a greater sense of autonomy. As such their overall status was generally higher. Granted, their workload was enormous, but this was, in a way compensated for by increased power within and outside of the household, (Figure 1.1 is a model of women's status in pre-colonial times, based on the materialist or Marxist tradition). Figure 1.1 shows that pre-colonial woman's relative control over the fruits of her labour was the material basis for exercising her political and social power.

*Figure 1.1: A Model of Women's Status: Pre-colonial Africa-Cameroon.*

Figure 1.1



*Source:* Formulated by Stella Nana-Fabu. Her economic role played a crucial part in determining her overall status in society

*Women's Economic Status in Colonial Times (1884–1960)*

The colonial rule in Cameroon drastically transformed the economic, political and social structures of traditional Cameroon. Traditional subsistence economies were transformed into monied or capitalist ones. Cameroonians began to see agriculture in a different light. It was now viewed as a money making venture and not as a means of subsistence alone. Agriculture was commercialized. Cash crop production increasingly replaced food production. European plantation owners, together with their predominantly male labour force, became the driving force of the agricultural economy, thereby displacing women. Commercial trade in cash crops such as cocoa, rubber, tea, coffee, flourished in Cameroon during the colonial *pax*.

The expansion of trade introduced a vast array of imported wares to the Cameroon village, ranging from all manner of consumption items to new tools such as ploughs, sewing machines, bicycles and pumps. These provided a simple, but effective form of capital investment. Cameroon farmers paid for this merchandise by increasing their cash crops production. The cultivation and export of cash production expanded considerably during this period. It was a “*wirtschaftswunder*” (economic miracle) as the Germans called it.

It is worth noting that, although cash crop production dominated the economy during colonial times, subsistence agriculture though somewhat transformed, continued to co-exist with it in Cameroon. This often fulfilled the vital functions for the colonial capitalist economy. Women continued to act as food providers for the labour force of the

cash crop economy, and later, for the workers in light manufacturing and service industries which were exclusively male domains at the time. Thus women not only acted as food providers, but unpaid labourers as well, in the cash crop economy. They replenished the labour force with their children. They sustained the labour force as food providers. They also provided the only available insurance for displaced workers by maintaining village lands while many of their husbands and brothers went away to work on European plantations.

In spite of their crucial role, women were often despised and debased during the colonial period. Men usurped women's positions as primary producers, and with it, their considerable power and autonomy. This colonial legacy, with respect to women's economic status, remains largely intact.

For example during the German, English and French colonial rule in Cameroon, plantation or commercial agriculture flourished. Nelson et al. (1974) note that by the end of German colonial rule in Cameroon around 1913, there were fifty-eight plantations in Cameroon. Also the production of certain commodities such as palm kernel rose from 9,518 tons in 1905 to 15,990 tons in 1913; Rubber from 1,034 tons in 1905 to 2926 tons in 1913 and cocoa from 1414 tons in 1905 to 5,157 tons in 1913. By the end of the British and French colonial rule in Cameroon these figures had tripled. Thanks in large part to the expropriation of large tracts of land for cash crop plantations by these colonial administrations. Expropriations such as these were designed to obtain the most fertile lands for cash crop cultivation, such as, lands on the slopes of mount Cameroon. This meant that many small farmers, both men and women were displaced from their lands.

The situation of women farmers generally worsened. The combination of indigenous male control over the remaining few tribal lands not occupied by Europeans and the bias of European experts against Cameroon women as farmers made subsistence farming more burdensome and less productive. This also excluded the vast majority of Cameroon women from cash crop agriculture. Most of these women, who during this period were in rural areas, continued cultivating food crops. This transformed the traditional division of labour in Cameroon. It was now clear that "colonial policy" fostered cash cropping, but because colonial officials were convinced that only men could and should farm, women were for example, not taught to diversify their crops. They were also excluded from the few training projects in new cultivation technologies and equipment. Intensive cultivation techniques such as the use of the plough and irrigation were now adopted by mainly males who were forced onto European plantations. These innovations required strength and prolonged absences from home which were less compatible with child bearing and child rearing, than were the tasks of subsistence farming. Men now usurped women's role as primary producers and, with it a considerable degree of the autonomy and power women previously enjoyed in the economic, political and social spheres during pre-colonial times.

As far as education was concerned, the situation was dismal for Cameroonians generally and Cameroon women especially during this period. The limited access of indigenous Cameroonians to schools, the shortage of schools and the inferior education provided by the few schools available made things difficult for most Cameroonians as far as their aspirations for a better life went during colonial times. The situation was by far worse for women. This was another part of the colonial legacy. Inferior education provided for girls reflected the inferior socio-economic position of women during

colonial times. The accessibility of women to schooling was far more limited than that for men. For instance according to the 1957 Census in Cameroon female population was above that of males. It was estimated at (51.4) percent women to (48.6) percent males. However the literacy rate was by far lower for women than for men. It was estimated at 25% for women and 72% for men (Ministry of Women's Affairs).

During the colonial period, especially in the latter half in Cameroon, education was a crucial stepping stone to all other types of economic and political involvement in the society. For example, because only men were trained to use new agricultural techniques and equipment, they, together with their white capitalist masters, became the driving force of the agricultural economy at the time. Since the Cameroon woman's participation in education was at best minimal relative to the Cameroon man's, she was deprived of the socio-economic opportunities available to her male counterpart by virtue of the latter's relative educational achievement. Western bias toward educating women, coupled with the financial constraints on Cameroon parents, since the introduction of taxes by European colonialists, further limited women's chances of ever being educated. A 65 years old woman explains the situation this way:

Should a situation arise in which parents with insufficient finances were to choose between sending their daughter or son to school, the son almost always had the edge over the daughter. Many parents during this period preferred to marry off their daughters and use the bride price to educate their sons...

This was the rule rather than the exception in colonial times. The combination of colonial biases and some traditional biases toward Cameroon women further jeopardized women's educational opportunities. The logic is to ensure that women stay in their "rightful places" at home for example, a colonial legacy.

If, and when, girls ever had the opportunity to go to school during the colonial era, and even to an extent today, they were confronted with another problem that is gender related. The school curricular for them was extremely sexist and unproductive. The school curricular for girls was centred on basic literacy, religious instruction and domestic science. The general intent of female education was to produce Black Victorian wives and mothers. Girls were trained to become primary school teachers, midwives, nurses, secretaries and other clerical jobs – all low-paying and low-status jobs. Men on the other hand were learning skills necessary in relatively high-paying, high-status jobs in the colonial social, political and economic structures. Women for the most part received training which only helped socialize them into secondary, non-decision making, and inferior positions, in the socio-political and economic spheres, and as wives and mothers in the derogatory Western sense. Cameroon women were taught in the colonial and missionary schools that their place in the "modern" colonial society was more "proper" than had been their roles in the traditional African society. However, the social reality was that the modernization of the Cameroon society was the root cause of the loss of considerable power and esteem for Cameroon women. The truth of the matter is that while the education of Cameroon men in the colonial era made it possible for them to be continuously integrated into the formal capitalist work relations, and thus, in a way improve their socio-economic status somewhat; women's education on the other hand, continuously excluded them from integration into the social, economic and political

structures, and reduced women's status to a level lower than that of their male counterparts.

The situation of the urban uneducated, married woman was and remains precarious. Separated from their farms, they were still expected to feed and clothe their families. Some of these women were forced to travel to their villages time and again to plant and harvest food; but this could still not provide a daily source of food for their families. For those with farms in the urban areas, their plots were usually too small to produce sufficient food for their families. Of course their husbands, whose salaries were ever so low, were often reluctant to give their wives some capital to start some sort of petty trade. Of necessity, some husbands would provide some support for their families. However, their wives continued to have the idea that feeding their children was their sole responsibility. As such these uneducated wives and women often sought some way to pursue petty trading which had now become the main income producing opportunity left open to them.

It was even worse for uneducated urban wives of highly educated men. Often they did not have the possibility to do some form of petty trading. These husbands often thought it will detract from their own status to have their wives trading. As a result, these women were often totally dependent on their husbands for their social status as well as their economic security.

Thus it is clear that the relative "high" socio-economic status women had heretofore enjoyed during pre-colonial times declined tremendously during colonial times. This could be seen in the structural, technical and cultural constraints placed on women during this era. These constraints (discriminatory policies toward women in productive education, to name one) adversely affected their participation in the economic sector during the post-colonial or modern era. The following section of this paper explores the implications of these constraints on women's economic status in modern Cameroon.

#### *Women's Economic Status in Post-colonial/ Modern Times (1960 – 2006)*

Though modern Cameroon has witnessed an increase in light manufacturing industries, the agricultural economy persists. The Cameroon economy still largely reflects the colonial legacy of the production of primary products. Cameroon's main exports today are limited almost exclusively to agricultural products such as bananas, cocoa, rubber, tea, coffee and timber together with crude oil. The economy of Cameroon remains essentially agriculture in nature. The greater part of the country's resources are obtained from its crops. Also the vast majority of Cameroonians (80%) are farmers of some sort (The ministry of Labour and Social Security 2005). Presently men continue to dominate in commercial agriculture while the majority of subsistence farmers are still women (61%) (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005). In modern times, even after the European *pax*, most big agriculture plantations are either government owned or held by European farmers. This has resulted in more exploitation of agricultural labourers generally and women in particular. This could be seen in the relatively low wages plantation owners still pay their predominantly male employers on whom their wives and children now increasingly depend for their livelihood. This puts enormous strain on women in both rural and urban areas.

### *Economic Status of Rural Women*

Rural women now contend with an increased and exploitative workload, since many able-bodied men have gone to seek wage-earning employment in the cities or on plantations. In fact women's work never seems to end. All day all night they tend to be doing one thing or another- cooking, cleaning etc. However because of low wages paid these male workers (about 30,000francs CFA a month), the money sent to their wives and families in the villages is hardly enough to sustain them. Rural Cameroon women must work twice as hard to make ends meet. In this way, they subsidize the meagre wages paid their husbands by company and plantation owners. In so doing these women inadvertently serve the interests of the dominant economic system and help to raise their profits.

Increasingly more rural women engage in petty trading to supplement their family income (9.3 %) although agriculture is still the dominant occupation of rural women (see Table 1)

**Table 1: Percent of Young Women 15-49 Years of Age in Various Economic Activities in Cameroon 2002 – 2005.**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Rural</b>
Domestic servants	32.2%	21.8%
School help / teacher	20.4%	7.6%
Unemployed	7.2%	2.5%
Agriculture	10.5%	55.6%
Commerce/Trade	16.5%	9.3%
Service and Administration	8.6%	1.8%
Others	4.4%	1.4%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%

**Source: Adapted from Ministry of Women's Affairs.**

The saddest thing about this all is that most women do not simply sell the surplus foods from their harvests. Increasingly these women find they must sell part of their own family's food and thereby lessen the chances of meeting their own nutritional needs. This explains why more and more village children suffer from malnutrition-linked diseases. Some major reasons for this food shortage in parts of Cameroon, especially in the Northern part of Cameroon are not only environmental but it is also due to the methods used in subsistence farming. For example women still practice traditional, rudimentary methods of agriculture to produce food for their families and the nation as a whole at a time when the demand for food has surged considerably. Many Cameroon men do cash-cropping with relatively new methods that increase their productivity and even their profits (when prices set by the international market are good) and these profits often belong to men alone. When women do cultivate cash crops, they do so in addition to cultivating food crops to feed their families. This is an extreme burden to women.

Also, because they generally lack access to credit it is impossible for women to engage in any fruitful cash or commercial agriculture. Most women cannot raise enough money to buy expensive modern machinery, such as tractor, to engage in profitable cash crop agriculture as some men do. The rural woman's acute lack of credit makes the possibility of her ever becoming a big market woman, like some of her urban counterparts,

remote. Through a pattern of African and European style discrimination toward Cameroon women, they are still being shut out of modern agricultural programs, in spite of the fact that they prevail in great number at the subsistence farming level.

Although women have been and remain central to the effort to overcome hunger and malnutrition in Cameroon, research programs and public policy generally have been very slow in helping to improve the effectiveness of their contribution to food production. True there are United Nations programs to help women in this domain such as “the U.N. Development Fund for Women” which provides financial and technical assistance to women’s projects, especially to those rural and urban women who are poor; but more remains to be done in this area. For example the U.N Development Fund for women provides financial assistance in the form of low interest loans for agricultural and commercial projects to poor women in urban and rural areas in the country. In the centre, south, South West and Littoral provinces of Cameroon, low interest loans are made available to individuals and women’s groups in towns such as Obala, Ebolowa, Muyuka and Pouma respectively to enable them buy machines to process cassava into *garri*<sup>2</sup> and *bobolo*<sup>3</sup>—all staple foods for people in these regions and most of the country. In the North West and the Northern provinces, these low interest loans make it possible for women to buy machines that process corn into corn flour. This has not only helped raise women’s economic status in these areas, but it has tremendously reduced their arduous workload and improved the nutrition of many Cameroonians. Today, the very high inflation rate in the country notwithstanding, these food products remain relatively affordable to most Cameroonians. It has also considerably reduced female rural exodus in these provinces. Until recently, rural-urban migration was overwhelmingly male. However the levels of female migration, particularly autonomous female migration have been rising with often negative socio-economic consequences for these women themselves and the families they leave behind in the villages. This phenomenon constitutes important changes in gender roles in both rural and urban areas which often culminate in the breakdown of the traditional extended family. This has led, for example, to massive migration of youths from rural areas to cities in Cameroon such as Douala and Yaoundé. It has also resulted in problems such as homeless youths in these cities and very high crime wave as these youths are usually unskilled and unemployed.

Of course there is a high rate of prostitution of young females in our cities. It is not uncommon to see young girls even at age 12 roaming the main streets of cities looking for male clients. In fact statistics in the city of Douala (2006) show that about 60% of female prostitutes in the city of Douala are carriers of the HIV virus. Most of these female prostitutes are young girls who have migrated to the city in search of work. When they are unable to find work they end up as sex workers. It is systematic with most of these girls as they are generally unskilled given the relatively high rate of illiteracy among girls especially in rural areas - (60%) (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 2006). The HIV/AIDS pandemic is undoubtedly one of the most serious challenges to the well-being of rural and urban families as well as development in general in Cameroon. As long as

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<sup>2</sup> Garri is ground cassava which is fermented and fried. It is then made into a sort of “foofoo” or cake and it is usually eaten with a vegetable stew.

<sup>3</sup> Bobolo is also ground cassava which is fermented and boiled into a form of cake. It could be eaten with fried or roasted meat and fish or a vegetable sauce.

there is pressure to commoditize sex in exchange for financial gain as the Cameroon economy continues to suffer, the spread of HIV/AIDS will be inevitable. The financial burden this puts on these often destitute families and the health budget of the nation is formidable. The problem of AIDS orphans has been a real financial drain on the health budget and family members who usually have to take care of these children. This results in new forms of families (for example grand-parents who are barely surviving now have to take care of AIDS orphans) and creates challenges for policy-makers which are often beyond their financial and technical capabilities. The country is already suffering from a crippling economic downturn. So these low interest loans provided by the U.N. Development Fund for women comes as a real "life saver" for both the citizens of Cameroon and their Government. It certainly does help curb the massive migration of females from rural to urban areas of Cameroon which has the snowball effect of reducing female prostitution in our cities. This helps in improving women's economic and health status as well as the general development of the country. For example in Pouma in the Littoral province where this low interest loan is available to women, a 25 years old single mother told us in an interview that:

... I see no need to go to the city of Douala anymore. In fact I was planning to do just that. Things had become impossible here financially. But now with this job I have in a cassava processing firm, I have decided to stay put in Pouma. At least the money I earn is about enough to make ends meet. I can send my children to school and provide food for everybody in my household. I was not even sure to find work in Douala. But what could I have done? Life had become unbearable here. I was just going to take a chance as many of my friends have done and hope that I find work in Douala. However, with my new job I can now see the light. Things have become better. I am even sure with time I will be able to save enough money which will help me start a small business selling fish and other food products. That will certainly keep me going...

Similar stories were repeated in most of the areas of the country where the U.N. low interest loans are available.

The Cameroon Government is also trying to help women in the economic domain.. It recognises the vital socio-economic role of women in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. It is now trying to focus it's energies on successful rural development, planning and technical program implementation for women. However, these programs have not really worked because experts who devise the programs often fail to recognize the multiplicity of the tasks of rural women. Also the greatest impact of new technology has been geared toward the production of cash crops. Insofar as men are heavily involved in the production of cash crops than are women, they are usually the beneficiaries of the advanced technology. The Cameroon Government encourages cash crop production because they can be sold for badly needed currencies. Meanwhile women continue working in the subsistence economy with crushing work burdens and no institutional support.

Other factors that interact to limit women's access to new technology are: the lack of information about new technology, cultural restraints that restrict some women in dealing with male extension workers such as in the predominantly Muslim northern

Cameroon, women's lack of control over crucial resources such as land, the relative bias of foreign technicians toward women and their general lack of understanding of gender roles in the Cameroon society. As such they often find themselves dealing with the wrong party.... the Cameroon men in a local subsistence production which is dominated by women; thus usurping women's subsistence role and making them more dependent on men. This is a clear example of how colonialism, modernization and capitalism interact to weaken and sometimes even destroy women's few relationships of equality and authority, leaving the more servile relationships to form the basis of women's modern status in Cameroon.

#### *The Economic Status of Urban women.*

The situation of rural Cameroon women today, bears striking resemblance to that of women wage labourers or the wives of male workers in urban areas. As was the situation during colonial times, women wage labourers are still outnumbered by men wage labourers in modern Cameroon. Also like their rural counterparts, urban women must work twice as hard at multiple tasks to make ends meet. They usually work as cash crop labourers as well as subsistence farmers. Furthermore, they often must grow more food than they need for their families' up-keep in whatever little patch of land is available, so as to have surplus to sell at the market for money to cover household needs. Sometimes they work as domestic servants (32.2% in urban Cameroon see table 1 for women's economic activities in rural and urban Cameroon) for Europeans and the Cameroonian elite to meet their expenses.

These women are not only responsible for bearing and raising children, they also must perform the domestic tasks they have done since pre-colonial times. During the day the children are often left alone much to the chagrin of mothers who are powerless to help the situation. Women's workload is so arduous that they barely have time for their own children. Also most of these women lack even basic education and this excludes them from white collar employment. As such their chances of escaping their poverty is, in fact, nil.

The situation is the same for women whose husbands work in factories and industries as wage labourers. Their meagre wages are usually not enough for the up-keep of the family in urban areas where the cost of living is very high. Moreover, land available for subsistence farming is scarce. Women married to wage labourers and even single women still turn to petty trading, mainly in food crops (*buyam, sellams*) as an alternative source of income. Their chances of getting employment in the factories and industries are slim compared to that of their male counterparts. The situation has not quite changed since colonial times. Recent statistics show that more women than men are unemployed in urban Cameroon (23.9% unemployed women as opposed to 20.4% unemployed men (National Employment Fund, 2005). Also the illiteracy rate among women in Cameroon remains significantly higher than that of men 59% for women are opposed to 41% for men (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2006).

Women's limited access to credit restricts them to petty traders. About 80% of economically active women in urban areas are petty traders of some sort (National Employment Fund 2005). Business expansion loans are difficult to acquire. For those women who are lucky to find work in factories and industries, it turns out to be a mixed blessing. After the often back-breaking factory work day, these women have to contend

with the domestic tasks that await them at home. Statistics also reveal that very few women become big business women as compared to males (See Table 2). Increasingly, the labour pattern in cities and towns in Cameroon creates a situation in which the streets and market places are dominated by women, while the modern sector shops, industries and offices are almost exclusively in male hands.

**Table 2: Distribution of Heads of Businesses by Sex. 2005**

Sector	Men	Women	Percent of women
Commerce / Trade	451	15	3.2%
Industry	316	6	1.8%
Building & Public Works	324	8	2.4%
Services	408	22	5.3%
Mines & Energy	42	0	0%
Timber	104	1	0.9%
Agriculture	104	3	2.3%

*Source:* Ministry of Employment and Social Security

Young unmarried urban women suffer no less in the way of exploitation. These women are more likely to be in prostitution informally or full time, or in some form of temporary liaison that provides potential support. For a lot of these women prostitution becomes the only alternative, as employment in the modern economic sectors is hard to come by. Preferential hiring of men still prevails. To these women, prostitution seems to provide a somewhat easier life than living in the village. Prostitution may actually provide an alternative source of income for some women, but it can hardly be regarded as a fully chosen profession or occupation when, in fact, there are no other alternatives for these women as far as employment goes. In the long run, many of these women soon have children to support, and as their incomes depend on sexual attractiveness, they face increasing financial insecurity as they grow older. To make matters worse, a lot of these women do not know the fathers of their children and as such there is no question of fathers paying child support. As a result these women find themselves stuck in their condition of economic and social marginality. The AIDS pandemic has even worsened their situation as statistics reveal that they are the most high risk group of HIV/AIDS infection in Cameroon today. More than 50% of prostitutes in the cities of Cameroon are already infected by the HIV/AIDS virus (Ministry of Health 2005). This has greatly contributed to the increase of AIDs orphans in the country, with often devastating consequences on the economy of the nation.

#### *Economic Status of the Educated Woman*

The economic status of the educated woman is not very different from that of the uneducated woman as far as gender discrimination in the economic sector is concerned. Even the educated women do not do well as educated men in the modern labour market. Instead, the segmentation of the labour market reflects the stereotypes attached to the job seekers rather than those attached to the jobs themselves. The level of female participation in the various economic sectors in Cameroon today, is clearly a reflection of the sex stereotypes of her former colonial masters. Women's occupational status lags far

behind that of Cameroon men, in spite of the overall increase in literacy rates among Cameroon women and the relative increase of female participation in the labour force. When it comes to male and female wages, the differential rewards for men and women are largely a reflection of the differential areas of education of Cameroonian males and females. Whereas a lot of women are trained to do low-paying less valued, low-prestige jobs such as being teachers at the primary school level, clerical workers, nurses, etc. ; most men are trained to work in high-profile, top-managerial and high-paying jobs such as directors of banks and top businesses ( see Table III).

**Table 3: Employment of Economically Active Women by Sectors in Cameroon**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Primary School Teachers	12
Clerical Workers	8
Nurses	11
Agriculture / Farming	38
Domestic Servants	10
Petty Trade	15
Others	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Survey for this study, 2006.

Class-ism and sexism are also major factors in determining women’s life chances and thus, their status in society generally. Chances are that if one comes from a “middle class” background, regardless of sex, one is more likely to succeed in life because of one’s relative access to crucial resources such as education than if one comes from a working class or peasant background in Cameroon.

The structural set-up in Cameroon (capitalist structure) has also produced a class divergence between the few middle class women who have attained their status either through education or hypergamy and are more concerned with protecting their class interests, much to the detriment of their fellow women at the “bottom of the heap”. This impedes female solidarity. The structures of the labour markets and the government function to reinforce sexism and class-ism through devices such as the ‘divide and rule’ strategy which keeps the middle and lower class women apart. This prevents a possible mobilization of all women against this unjust system. The end result is that class-ism and sexism, now more than ever, interact to reduce the vast majority of Cameroon women to the “lowest class of the peasantry”. In fact the elite Cameroon women thrive on the unpaid and underpaid labour of the vast majority of Cameroon women. Even the popular women’s clubs and organizations today are not what they used to be in pre-colonial times. In pre-colonial times women used to look out for one another, irrespective of one’s social status in traditional societies. There was female solidarity then. Today many of these women’s organizations (especially within some political parties) and clubs mainly emphasize the acquiring of wifely skills especially of the western type and the playing of

stereotypical female roles. By encouraging these activities, these organizations are serving the interests of the dominant economic system as the traditional women's economic and political organizations of producers have been largely replaced by organizations of consumers--mainly of European goods.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Thus far it is clear that, some women, mainly the few educated ones, did take advantage of the initial wave of post-independence employment in Cameroon, while some others resorted to hypergamy and are now part of the relatively small Cameroon elite. Other women and a few market women have also become big market women thanks in large part to associations that loan out money to people, women in particular (*tontins* or *njangis*) to carry out their business projects. However, the majority of Cameroon market women are still struggling petty traders. Most bank loans still consider these women to be unworthy of credit, and as such women find it difficult to acquire loans to improve their businesses. Also rural women, who are mainly subsistence farmers, still suffer from lack of access to education and lack of access to modern agriculture techniques resulting from the interplay of imported sex discrimination practices and traditional aspects of gender discrimination.

All women should organize their own trade unions to fight such exploitations by men and Europeans in business, industry and the agriculture sector. In fact women could set up their own banks. This would restore their self confidence, independence and leadership in their own destinies, as it was in pre-colonial times, if not even better. Women must not depend on men who may even be unable to earn a living due to the high unemployment rates and low wages paid today. Women should organize and build their own economic base and regain some of the control over their destinies that they enjoyed in pre-colonial times. General education and new agricultural technologies should be made adaptable and available to women farmers in both rural and urban areas. There should also be a comprehensive review of urban and rural development policies that take into consideration the multiplicity of tasks the ordinary Cameroon woman in particular has to put up with daily. In short development programmes should be gender sensitive.

In order to promote a more genuine female solidarity, women's organisations should be "women-centered" awareness groups with mutual aid as their main goal irrespective of class. They should be similar or comparable to those of pre-colonial times when mutual help among women was the norm. These are some of the major ways women can regain their status in society on the whole and in the economic domain in particular. This is so because in the final analysis, both upper and lower class women are victims of the system that largely fosters and promotes male interests, whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. The Cameroon women must take the initiative to overcome their oppression.

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