

## **CAMEROONIAN WOMEN IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, 1960-2015**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the role and forces that determined women political leadership at the legislative and executive levels since independence and reunification of Cameroon in 1960-61. A gender perspective in African political leadership has animated scholarly debate since the end of colonial rule in most African countries in the 1960s. Patriarchal leadership has been the dominant narrative in African history, so efforts to promote gender parity in political leadership and representation in some countries, notably Rwanda, Uganda, and South Africa, are encouraging. But the portrait generally painted is a gloomy one of women's leadership around the world, and particularly in Africa. Prominent women in political and decision-making positions are still too few and inconsequential in many African countries. In Cameroon's leadership history, some women have occupied decision-making positions, but their numbers are far from equal to that of men because of socio-cultural, economic, and political challenges. This paper historicizes the changes in women's leadership since independence through a content analysis of secondary works and concludes that, despite some token changes, the overall picture is not heartening.*

Women have provided comparatively limited leadership in the legislature and executive arms of government in Cameroon since its independence from French Cameroon in 1960 and the reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Cameroun Republic in 1961. Yet the plethora of literature on political leadership in African countries clearly shows a predominantly male bias, beginning with the indigenous governing institutions and moving forward to modern leadership. One might prematurely conclude, therefore, that women have occupied political leadership positions only rarely or only as exceptions. Colonial rule clearly laid the basis for women's limited involvement in political leadership—or even their exclusion from leadership—in such African countries as Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Dahomey (Day, 2007, p. 416, 501-502;

Sudarkasa, 1986, p. 91; Hoffer, 1972, p. 151) prior to and after independence. And yet, prior to the colonial period, women were integrated into decision-making and leadership processes (Nwadegwe and Nwadegwe, 2014). This sharply contrasts with Kumar's (2002, p. 107) contention that historically speaking, women have been excluded from participation in politics and institutions of politics. In Nigeria, as in several other African countries, admittedly very few women have held political offices, either elected or appointed (Badmus, 2006, p. 55; Abdela, 2000, p. 17). More recently, however, a growing number of women have taken leadership positions at the executive and legislative levels in Cameroon and other African countries.

The fortunes of women as leaders in contemporary times all over the world differ from one country or region to another. They are in legislative and executive leadership positions in countries like Sweden, Argentina, and Rwanda (Montemarano 2011, p. 3; Paxton *et al*, 2007, p. 264). And by 2014 the United States topped the chart of the highest number of women at the highest political level, with six governors. In contrast, the Pacific region had no woman in these top positions. Every country in Africa and the Americas has had at least one woman as a Minister (Le Sexe Droit au Cameroun 2014, p. 15; Clark, 1991). Cameroon has at least ratified the main international and regional legal instruments for promoting and protecting women's rights (Doffonsouet *al* 2014: 12). These developments could, of course, be partly a result of pressure at the international level. The Beijing Platform of Action in 1995 called on governments all over the world to take measures to ensure that women had equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. The African Union (AU), on its part, has made several declarations, which include Article 4(1) of the Constitutive Act, Dakar Platform for Action (1994), African Plan of Action to Accelerate the Implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action for the Advancement of Women (1999), Protocol for the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) and the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004) (Online Discussion on Women 2007, p. 3). These instruments all aim at promoting the full participation of women in political leadership and processes in African countries.

Despite the instruments, practical implementation remains a problem. For instance, the representation of women in Cameroon's political leadership remains low even though efforts

have been made in this direction to reverse the trend. Even though a thirty per cent quota has been set, very few of the councils have adhered to it, and this is at least partly due to many women's lack of confidence and many women's ignorance of the electoral system.<sup>1</sup>The country's constitution upholds the principle of gender equality, but several legal, social, religious, and cultural factors militate against this. The election governing body Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) defends sociological and gender representations in the composition of lists by political parties, and those who do not adhere have their lists rejected. Thus, in the general elections of 2013, 20 out of 48 party lists were rejected for failing to respect the gender requirement (Gender Empowerment and Development 2010, p. 9; Report of the CDES Cameroon 2013, p. 12). But even though women represent over 51% of Cameroon's population of about 22 million (Submission on the Rights of Women, 2014), they are grossly underrepresented in legislative and executive decision positions. While little progress has been made in women's leadership, activists' voices still call for women's leadership to go beyond window dressing. In just such a spirit, this paper reviews the evolution of women's participation in leadership positions in Cameroon at the legislative and executive levels under the governments of President Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya.

### **Women Leadership in Indigenous Institutions and during the Colonial Era**

Women were political leaders in indigenous institutions in Cameroon and other parts of Africa in the pre-colonial and post-independence eras. While some led directly, others did so indirectly (Kah, 2011; Robertson 2013. p. 67). Women were and still are leaders of traditional female societies in Cameroon. These include the *Takembeng* of the Ngemba-speaking people, *Anlu* of Kom, *Kelu* of the Laimbwe, *Liengu* of the Bakweri, and *Koo* of the Bassa (Atanga 2010, p. 7; Kah 2004; 2009). In the kingdom of Nso, power or leadership was gendered meaning that it resided in both male and female members of the kingdom (Goheen 1995: 73). In Ntanh village in Bamenda today, the Ntanh Women Common Initiative Group (C.I.G) got a woman elected into the all-male traditional council.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Guardian*, "Women in African Politics: A Vote of Confidence" accessed on January 29 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/women-african-politics-vote-cameroon](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/women-african-politics-vote-cameroon).

<sup>2</sup> Veronica Kini, "Cameroon: Ntanh Village Women Common Initiative Group" [www.groots.org/members/cameroon2.html](http://www.groots.org/members/cameroon2.html), accessed on February 2016.

On the other hand, Atanga and Ntongho argue that female leadership institutions are not equal to male regulatory societies in their functions (Atanga. 2010;Ntongho, 2011). Traditional institutions like *Takembeng* were mobilised by the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party in Bamenda in the early 1990s to fight social injustice and unemployment in Cameroon. This mobilization provided women with collective political leadership for a national cause. Similarly, Assiga Ahanda Marie-Therese, chief of the Ewondos of Yaounde, was an active leading first class female traditional ruler. She occupied high-ranking political positions in both the Cameroon National Union (CNU) and the Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM) parties (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, p. 255). She is one of the few female traditional leaders in Cameroon integrated into modern political leadership in the country by the ruling party.

Women political leadership at the executive level was also exercised by elderly women, queen mothers, co-chiefs, or sovereign queens. Elderly women appeared in public when the need arose and often controlled the men who controlled the societies. In fact, they controlled these societies through their control of the men who controlled them. Among the Bavek and Ide were sovereign queens and women co-chiefs (Konde 1993, p. 90). The Bavek sovereign queen provided effective political leadership, but it diminished with the imposition of German and British rule in the area. Their power or leadership was no less important than that of men. They both governed their people in cooperation and understanding. This was indeed pragmatic executive leadership. Apart from women's participation in political leadership in traditional institutions prior to colonial rule, they also led people during the colonial era. There was legislative leadership through the local or municipal councils, parliament, executive arms of government, and international organizations.

During the colonial period in Cameroon, spanning from July 1884 with the Germans' annexation of the territory to 1960-61 when France and Britain left the territory, women fought for leadership in executive decision-making institutions. They started by achieving suffrage in October 1946, but were only able to vote men into political leadership positions. Six years later, however, the first women contested for seats in the Constituent Assembly of French Cameroon.

But all of them lost. Later, in 1957 and 1959, the first female parliamentarians in French and British Southern Cameroons respectively were co-opted members into parliamentary and political leadership. Many were not able to lead as members of the assembly because of their limited Western education. Political parties like the *Evolution social camerounaise* (ESOCAM) described them as best suited for household duties than in leadership (Atanga 2010, p. 9-10; Terretta, 2007, p. 63).

In spite of this, the *Union Démocratique Femmes Camerounaises* (UDEFEC) in French Cameroon created a women's wing of the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC), which was more or less independent of the party. Leaders of UDEFEC confronted the repressive colonial force that was unleashed by the French colonial government against French Cameroonians. The political torchbearers of UDEFEC included Marthe Ouandie, Marthe Moumie, and Marie-Irene Ngapeth. This trio were married respectively to Ernest Ouandie, Félix Roland Moumie, and Job René, leaders of the UPC. The three women, together with Gertrude Omog and Emma Mbem, started a discussion aimed at the formation of a women's party as a companion of the UPC. When invited to attend the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in 1951, they seized the opportunity to found the UDEFEC. Although some UPC members were against an independent UDEFEC, the Secretary General of the party, Um Nyobe, defended their independent political leadership from the UPC (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014, p. 211; Terretta 2007, p. 63-69). UDEFEC therefore offered a platform for women to be in the executive arm of a political party.

Meanwhile, in British Southern Cameroons, the colonial administration gathered information about women's participation in the Native Authorities (NAs) and representation in local government. Only women with salaries or another form of easily accessible income (like barkeepers) were eligible to vote and occupy leadership positions in these NAs (Adams 2006. p. 7). This condition of course limited the number of women members of the NAs who were considered on an equal basis with men. In other parts of the territory, provision was made for special representatives of women's interests in the NAs, important legislative arms of the British colonial administration. In Bamenda, for example, the South Western Federated Council provided four places for women representation, while the South Eastern Federation allowed for

three seats. Although women gained representation on behalf of women's interests, they never had the same rights and privileges as their male counterparts. Apart from the fact that a woman was appointed into parliament, another was appointed to the British Southern Cameroons Scholarship Board (Adams 2006, p. 7). The colonial authorities recognized only limited women political leadership in parliament; men continued their domination of this legislative arm of the administration. After independence and reunification, Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya were influenced by several factors to have women serve in the legislature and executive positions.

### **Influences on Ahidjo and Biya's Policies towards Women Leadership in Cameroon**

Several forces determined the policy of Ahidjo and Biya towards women's participation in the legislature and executive arms of government as leaders of their own constituencies. These forces in Cameroon and other African countries were socio-cultural, political, and economic in nature (Doho, 2004; Arriola and Johnson, 2014, p. 495). In keeping with the socio-cultural and family values of many ethnic groups in Cameroon Ahidjo at first encouraged women to remain good mothers and housewives (Galega and Tumnde 2004: 237-238). It was not the wish of his government to generally encourage women to improve their participation in governance. A few years later, however, the Ahidjo government decided to encourage women's participation in politics—but in a separate structure of their own, the Women Cameroon National Union (WCNU), an arm of the CNU formed in September 1966. Even with this, though, the new party opted to emphasize traditional roles for women. Women were encouraged to engage in such domestic activities as knitting, sewing, cooking, and taking care of the household (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, p. 237-238).

In the last years of the 1960s, the Ahidjo government became more sensitive to women's participation in leadership at the legislature and executive arms of government. This might have been caused by the increasing number of women who went to school and became literate. Several women were appointed to public office, and a special ministry charged with women affairs was created. Other women were elected or chosen on the list system into the West and East Cameroon Houses of Assembly, and a few of them were also appointed into ministerial positions during the presidency of Ahidjo. One of these women, Julienne Keutcha, was

appointed as a member of the Politbureau of the ruling CNU party (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, p. 238). This gradual change to elect or appoint women into political leadership positions was probably due to the need to mobilize all and sundry towards the socio-economic and political development of Cameroon. It was also because of the Western education a few of them had acquired, which enabled them to overcome barriers and work in the public sphere (Konde 1993, p. 102). Madam Julienne Keutcha, for example, was the wife of a Bamileke district governor (The Political Jungle 1962, p. 19), and this would have contributed to her election into the assembly and appointment into executive positions in the ruling party. The UN International Decade for Women, 1975-1985, might also have created awareness in the Ahidjo government to appoint some women into executive positions in government. Although during his speeches Ahidjo hailed women for their contributions to national development, his government was not genuinely committed to making them actively participate in their numbers in the political affairs of Cameroon (Galega and Tumnde 2004, p. 240). This might have been due to Ahidjo's cultural background because among the Hausa-Fulani, women did not really exercise political leadership in the public arena.

Under the presidency of Paul Biya other forces contributed to make women take up elective and appointive positions in parties and the state. Biya was more educated than his predecessor. He was also trained in the tradition of enlightenment, whose features were represented in his book *Communal Liberalism*. Besides, the Women conference in Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 and the resolutions arrived at contributed to the creation of the Ministry of Women Affairs in Cameroon. Many other women's movements, both at home and abroad, have been engaged in advocacy to pressure the government to consider some degree of gender balance in appointments in Cameroon (Fonjong 2001, p. 223). In spite of these forces in favour of women's participation in political leadership, there are still societal barriers and norms regarding gender and women leadership that militate against women's political leadership in Cameroon. In addition, many women have limited political skills and experience, which has excluded them from leadership and decision-making positions (Kange 2006: 89). The over three hundred political parties in Cameroon pay lip service to women's leadership, but the national system does not promote accountability in terms of gender equality and representation (Kumichii 2010, p. 12-13). Gender

equality has also been politicized to serve as a springboard for a few elite women—like Dr. Dorothy LimungaNjeuma—to move up the hierarchy and maximize opportunities for themselves (Orock 2007, p. 93). Any small advancements in women’s leadership seem compounded by the fact that many women fear women and so do not campaign or elect them (Welch 1983, p. 58). This has not helped to increase the number of women in political leadership positions as they continuously lag behind in Cameroon.

Other problems that militate against women’s political leadership include many women’s financial dependence on men. Many Mbororo women, for example, in spite of progress made in the education of women, stay at home. Political parties preach gender equality, but tend not to practice it, and most men only reluctantly allow women to share political leadership positions, preferring that they maintain household roles (Mussa, 2012). Furthermore, the media frequently intimidate and bully women who venture into politics, and family members oppose women who decide to venture into politics. These are discouraging experiences shared by many working women in discussions about the place of women in political leadership. Still other institutional challenges include local or religious customs, and many women do not have the requisite education to propel them into political leadership. Other factors militating against women’s participation in politics and decision-making positions include discrimination, domestic violence, and reproductive health rights, which only increase their vulnerability (WILPF Annual Report, 2014, p. 1). Women have for a long time generally held few decision-making or political leadership positions in ministries and other government bodies in Cameroon (Fact Sheet, 1994). Although women constitute more than 50% of Cameroon’s population, their political leadership in councils, parliament, and other appointive positions is grossly inadequate (Anumo, 2013). Presidential appointments are still overwhelmingly in favour of men (Submission on the Rights of Women, 2014; Mimesse Me Fame, 2014, p. 240).

### **Women Leadership in the Legislature and Executive Positions after Independence and Reunification**

Women’s leadership in the local legislative structures was grossly lagging behind that of men. Several years after independence and reunification, women still occupied only backstage positions in the municipal councils. Their number in duty positions, as examined later in this chapter,

remained low in spite of efforts made through training, election, and affirmative action to increase it (Niyindi 2008 p. 5). From the late 1980s onwards, there was an increase in the number of women councillors, leaders in their council areas, but the increase was still not significant enough. In the politically active North West Region, there were only three female Mayors in 2016 (Mussa, 2016; Nofuru, 2014). Between 1987 and 2012, the number of women councillors in Cameroon rose from 436 out of 5,347 to 1,651 out of 10,632 councillors. Within the same period, the percentage of women's representation in these councils rose from 8.3 to 15.5. The number of female mayors also rose—from only 1 in 1987 to 24 in 2012. But these 24 women mayors were out of a total of 360 mayors in the country (Gender Empowerment and Development, 2010, p. 46).

Women in leadership positions at the municipal council level in Cameroon after 2012 notably changed. Following the municipal elections of 2013, more women were elected assistant mayors into councils than ever before. The number of female mayors represented about 9% of the total number of mayors in the country, and for the female assistant mayors, it was about 30%. The increase was significant. The regions with the highest number of women mayors after the mayoral elections of 2013 were the South West, Littoral, and East. Meanwhile, the Centre, South, and South West registered the highest number of female assistant mayors in all the councils of Cameroon. The historical increase in female mayoral positions notwithstanding, a woman has still never been appointed as Government Delegate to any of the city councils of Cameroon (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014. pp. 201-202). This is an important executive leadership position at the local-government level, but it has been contested by opposition political parties.

In the national assembly of Cameroon after independence and reunification in 1960/61, women were still grossly under-represented. The first to contest and win elections into the national assembly of the Cameroun Republic on April 10, 1960, was previously mentioned: Julienne Keutcha, wife of a Bamileke district governor. The first Muslim woman got elected in 1973 (Atanga, 2010, p. 9). Madam Keutcha's political ascendancy saw her elected Secretary of the Bureau of the National Assembly. She was also a member of commissions of the legislative and administrative affairs and social affairs. During the Garoua Congress of the Cameroon National Union (CNU) in 1969, Keutcha was elected into the central committee of the party, which

constituted 35 members. Another noteworthy woman in decision-making structures of the CNU were Delphine Tsanga, elected President of the Women's Cameroon National Union (WCNU). And elected vice-presidents of the legislature have included Madam Gladys Silo Endeley and Joséphine Nguetti. A list of other elected women political leaders includes Madam Alvine Ekotto, who became secretary of the WCNU; Madam Rosalie Motaze, the Assistant Secretary; Madam Jeannette Tagny, the treasurer; Madam Regina Ngeng, the assistant treasurer; Madam Djamaré, the auditor. The advisers of the WCNU were Madam Martha Bouquet and Julienne Keutcha. During the period from 1965 to 1970, Gladys Difo was also member of a male-dominated parliament of the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014, p. 221).

The under-representation of women in legislature and its leadership structures lasted until the 1980s, more than twenty years after independence and reunification. In the mid-1980s the percentage of women represented in the national assembly rose above 5 per cent of the total number of parliamentarians. Among the few women parliamentarians in the early period were Julienne Keutcha, Gladys Difo, Gwendolyne Burnley, Chilla Prudence Helena, Rosalie Motaze, Jeanne Fotso Magne, Isabelle Ebanda, and Sarah Nwanack. Madam Chilla joined Julienne Keutcha in the third legislature of Cameroon, who as an old member was elected member of the Commission for Foreign Affairs, Commission on Constitutional Law, Legislation, Federation Administration, and the Armed Forces. Chilla, on her part, was elected secretary of the Commission on Finance, Economic Affairs, Plan and Infrastructure, and member of the Commission on Social and Cultural Affairs of the national assembly (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014 p. 222). After 1980 the percentage of women in the national assembly rose to more than 10 per cent, reaching 14 per cent between 1988 and 1992. A total of 27 women were then elected into parliament in 1988, which represented an increase of ten women in a parliament of 120 members. This percentage, instead of increasing, dropped to 11 per cent between 1992 and 2007 (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, p. 252). For over two decades under Ahidjo's leadership of Cameroon, only a handful of women were parliamentarians and members of other public agencies in Cameroon. Although Ahidjo would praise women in his speeches and stress their importance to national development, he did not have a genuine commitment to enhance their participation in political and economic affairs (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, p. 240). Women

issues were simply not as central then as they became from the 1980s onwards. The one-party mentality and male chauvinism would go a long way in explaining this hypocritical behaviour of Ahidjo. The statistics in Table 1 speak for themselves, showing the number of women who were elected into the Cameroon national assembly since independence and reunification.

**Table 1**

**Evolution of Number of Women in the National Assembly in Cameroon**

<b>Year of Election</b>	<b>Assembly Seats</b>	<b>No. of Men</b>	<b>No. of Women</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
1960	100	99	1	1.0
1962	50	49	1	2.0
1964	50	49	1	2.0
1970	50	48	2	4.0
1973	120	113	7	5.8
1978	120	108	12	10.0
1983	120	103	17	14.2
1988	180	153	27	15.2
1992	180	157	23	12.8
1997	180	170	10	5.6
2013	180	124	56	31.1

**Source:** Samgena D.S. Galega and Tumnde Martha, 2004, “Reversing Decades of Gender Injustice in Cameroon, in *The Leadership Challenge in Africa under Paul Biya*, edited by John MukumMbaku and Joseph Takougang, 235- (Trenton: Africa World Press), 253; Daniel Abwa and Justine DifoTchunkam, 2014, “L’Evolution Perfectible des Femmes dans la Vie Publique et Politique Camerounaise,” in *Genre, Leadership et Participation au Cameroun (1931-2013): Le Cameroun sur le Chemin de la Parité, More Women in Politics*, 197. ONU.

The number of women elected into the national assembly remained static between 1960 and 1964. In the 1970 elections, the number of women in the federal assembly increased from one to two out of a total of 50 parliamentarians. This was an insignificant increase. In 1973, after the May 20, 1972, Referendum that transformed Cameroon from a federal to a unitary state, seven women were elected into a parliament of 120 members. It was not until 1988 and 2013 that respectively 27 and 56 women were elected into a parliament of 180 deputies. Although women now represent 31.1 per cent of the parliamentarians, this still does not reflect the numerical strength of women in Cameroon.

The putting in place of the Senate in 2013 for the first time saw an impressive number of women elected, and still others were appointed by the executive. In the senatorial elections of April 14, 2013, 17 women were elected from the 70 elective seats into this arm of the legislature. Of the 30 who were appointed by the President of the Republic, making a total of 100 senators, three of them were women, making a total of 20 women senators. This increase in women representation in the legislature, although still inadequate, was because the law required each candidate list to have at least a female candidate—without which, many of them might still have been excluded from the first senate of Cameroon. The appointment of only three women from 30 appointive positions also speaks volumes of the patriarchal leadership in Cameroon.

Over the years, from the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo to that of Paul Biya, women have thus had fluctuating fortunes at the highest level of decision-making or leadership of the ruling party. In 1969, only one woman was in the Central Committee of the party, which consisted of 35 members. In 1975, two women, namely Delphine Tsanga and Mary Akwe, became only alternate members of the Central Committee. Within the leadership of the party, there was one substantive

and two alternate members, mainly for geopolitical reasons. Mary Akwe was the Anglophone alternate member, and the other two members were Francophones, one substantive and the other alternate. Out of a total membership of the central committee of the CNU of 49, there were only three women. In 1980 the number of women increased by one in a central committee of 50 members. Five years later, during the CNU congress in Bamenda, six women were elected into the Central Committee of the newly formed Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (CPDM). Among these women, who went on to play different political leadership positions in Cameroon, were YaouAïssatou, Isabelle Bassong, Gwendolyne Burnley, Ruth Ekindi, Josepha Mua and Julienne Pahane (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014 pp. 212-213). Table 2 shows the few women in the corridors of power and political leadership during the era of the single-party mentality in Cameroon.

**Table 2**

**Women in the Central Committee of the CNU and CPDM, 1969-1990**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Position</b>
Julienne Keutcha	1969-1985	West	Assistant Secretary of Syndicates, Social and Women Issues
Delphine Tsanga	1975-1985	Centre	
Mary Akwe	1975-1985	South West	Adviser
Isabelle Ebanda	1980-1985	Littoral	
Josepha Mua	1980-1990	North West	Assistant Secretary Youth Affairs
Ruth Ekindi	1985-1990	Littoral	
Isabelle Bassong	1985-1990	South	Assistant Secretary Press, Information and Propaganda
YaouAïssatou	1985	North	
Gwendolyne Burnley	1985	South West	Assistant Secretary

			Women Affairs
Julienne Pahane	1985-1990	West	-
Rose ZangZanguélé	1990	Centre	-
Francoise Foning	1990	West	-
MbonoMadaleine	1990	South	-
Gladys S. Endeley	1990	South West	Alternate Member

**Source:** Daniel Abwa and Justine DiffoTchunkam, 2014, “L’Evolution Perfectible des Femmes dans la Vie Publique Camerounaise,” in Genre, *Leadership et Participation au Cameroun (1931-2013): Le Cameroun sur le Chemin de la Parité, More Women in Politics*, 213-214. ONU.

Women membership of the Central Committee of the CNU and CPDM between 1969 and 1990 shows clearly that there were very few women in political leadership or decision-making organs of the political party structure of Cameroon. Besides, regions like the East never had a female member of the Central Committee of the ruling party after its creation. There is also an infinitesimal representation of women at the highest decision-making structure of other political parties in Cameroon. As of 2014, only four women were members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014, p. 214), the leading opposition political formation in Cameroon.

In the executive arm of government, women’s political leadership compared with that of men has been grossly below average. A few women have been appointed cabinet ministers or vice ministers. They have been appointed to lead ministries mainly concerned with women and social affairs. Since independence, women have not been appointed governors of regions, and today only two are Divisional Officers (DOs) out of a total of 360 DOs in the country. They are also still to be appointed Senior Divisional Officers (SDOs) (Galega and Tumnde, 2004, pp. 253-255; Report of the CDES, 2013, p. 12). Table 3 presents the number of women compared to men who have been appointed to executive leadership positions in Cameroon.

**Table 3**  
**Women in Executive Positions in Cameroon 1982-1997**

<b>Appointment</b>	<b>Ministries</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
1982	29	27	2	6.9
1983	31	29	2	6.5
1983	31	29	2	6.5
1983	30	27	3	10.0
1984	35	31	4	11.4
1984	36	31	5	13.9
1985	44	40	4	9.1
1986	37	34	3	8.1
1987	45	42	3	6.6
1988	33	31	2	6.1
1989	32	30	2	6.3
1989	30	28	2	6.7
1990	30	29	1	3.3
1994	34	32	2	8.3
1997	51	48	3	5.8
1998	49	46	3	6.1
2004	65	59	6	9.2
2010	62	56	6	9.7
2012	66	57	9	13.6

**Source:** Source: Samgena D.S. Galega and Tumnde Martha, 2004, “Reversing Decades of Gender Injustice in Cameroon,” in *The Leadership Challenge in Africa under Paul Biya*, edited by John MukumMbaku and Joseph Takougang, 235- (Trenton: Africa World Press), 254; Gender Empowerment and Development, 2010, Beijing +15: The Reality of Cameroon and Unfinished Business. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 46; Submission on the Rights of Women in the Republic of Cameroon Prepared by The Advocates for Human Rights a Non-Governmental Organisation in Special Consultative Status, January 24, 2014.

The number of women who have been appointed into executive positions is inconsequential. Between 1982 and 2012, the highest number of women in executive positions was registered in 2012. Out of a government of 66 Ministers and assistant Ministers, only 9 women were appointed by President Paul Biya. The lowest number was in 1990, when only one woman was a member of government of 30 Ministers. In the 2004 and 2010 appointments, six women were appointed into executive leadership positions. In other senior executive or appointive positions, women were still lagging behind. Among these senior executive positions were Secretary Generals in the ministries or state universities, Rectors and/or Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors/Rectors, Director Generals of State-run companies, state representatives in international organizations/institutions and senior positions in the armed forces.

A few women since independence and reunification found favour with the executive arm of government and were appointed to leadership positions within the party or the state in their own right. One of these was Dr. Dorothy Limunga Njeuma, who rose to the apex of the Cameroon political system at age 32. This came more or less as a surprise because she had neither political connections nor political aspirations. She was interested in her own intellectual pursuit and was greatly encouraged by her own parents. Emmanuel Konde captures the circumstances of Dorothy Njeuma when she was called and appointed by President Ahmadou Ahidjo. In his recounting of the event that led to her appointment as Vice Minister of Education, Konde notes Njeuma's account:

On that Monday, June 30<sup>th</sup>, I had gone to the market to buy some things for my personal use and for our team [Tennis Federation]. When I returned home at 12:30 p.m., I met a security officer posted at my door. He handed me a note from the President. The note said that the President would like to see me at 12:00 p.m., and here I was . . . 12:30 p.m. My first reaction was to run through my mind what I may have done wrong. I had never met the President in person and did not know him. I could not understand why he wanted to see me.

I discussed the matter with my husband, got dressed up and left for the presidency with the guard. We arrived there at 12:55 p.m., and five minutes later I was received by the President.

The President wanted to know where I had been all morning. I told him what I had been doing. He then said that he did not know me but had decided to appoint me his Vice Minister of National Education. I hesitated for a few seconds, thought over the proposition, and then thanked him—promising to do my best (Konde, 1993, p. 98).

Apart from serving Cameroon as Vice Minister of National Education from 1975 to 1985, Dorothy LimungaNjeuma was also Director of the Buea University Centre before becoming its pioneer Vice Chancellor, when this centre was transformed into a university by a presidential decree of 1992. She laid a solid foundation for this first English-speaking university in Cameroon. During this period of her stewardship, Njeuma was named the best female manager in Cameroon and was also the Vice President of the Association of African Universities (AAU). She left Buea for the University of Yaounde I and initiated reforms in this citadel of learning. She is currently a member of Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) representing the South West Region (Curriculum Vitae of Dr Dorothy LimungaNjeuma).

Another prominent Anglophone woman who, upon completion of her studies, served the West Cameroon government in administrative positions and who then was co-opted into politics was Gwendolyne Burnley. She left administration for politics in 1968. Although she was co-opted into the lone CNU political party in Cameroon soon after independence, it was not much to her liking; she developed a liking for it when she realised how effective she could be. In the single party Burnley was elected through a list system into the West Cameroon House of Assembly, and she remained there until the dissolution of the federal state in 1972 through a referendum. She continued as a member of the national assembly of Cameroon in 1973 and was returned to this assembly several times—until 1988, when she was defeated in the elections, the year when the transformed CNU became the Cameroons Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) and introduced more than one list in the legislative elections. This ended the single list system of

elections introduced in 1966 with the formation of the CNU through the dissolution of all existing political parties in Cameroon (Konde, 1993, p. 96).

The political leadership of Mrs Burnley went beyond the national territory. Her education and commitment made it possible for the government to select her as a member of the Cameroonian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly in 1975. This came shortly after her return from Mexico, where she had been elected member of the Second Committee of the International Women's Year Conference that drafted the resolutions of the Women's Year UN Conference. In her first experience at the UN General Assembly, Burnley was elected the Second Vice President of the Committee and spokesperson for the African group (Konde, 1993, p. 96). This was a feat which surprised even Mrs Burnley, and it was an achievement in leadership not only for her, but also for the country.

Other outstanding women in the executive arm of government were Delphine Tsanga(nee ZangaTsogo) who, like Dorothy Njeuma, was the only other woman member of the cabinet of Cameroon in 1975. She was actually the first Cameroon's female Minister since Dorothy Njeuma was Vice Minister. Her political career received a boost when in 1964 she was elected president of the National Council of Women in Cameroon. A year later, she was elected into the Legislative Assembly and re-elected in 1970. Meanwhile, a year before her re-election into the legislature in 1970, she was elected president of the WCNU, the female wing of the ruling CNU party of President Ahidjo. In July 1970, while serving as a Member of Parliament, Delphine Tsanga was appointed by Ahidjo as Vice Minister of Health and Public Welfare, and on July 30, 1975, she was appointed Minister of Social Affairs (DeLancey *et al*, 2010 p. 373). Her leadership of the WCNU gave her political clout, gaining the favor of Ahidjo, but when power changed hands in 1982 with the sudden resignation of Ahidjo for his constitutional successor, Paul Biya, Tsanga's political rise was halted by forces that were at odds with Ahidjo.

There were other women who made a successful stint in politics before falling into limbo or who are still braving the odds of political leadership. These included Elizabeth Tankeu, Yaou Aïssatou, Isabelle Bassong, Rose Zanguélé, and Catherine EkoNgomba. Between 1970 and 1988, these women in addition to Dorothy LimungaNjeuma and Delphine Tsanga, served in

various executive positions in Cameroon. Rose Zanguélé, Catherine EkoNgomba, Isabelle Bassong, Elizabeth Tankeu, and Yaou Aïssatou were respectively Minister of Social Affairs, Secretary of State for National Education, Secretary of State for Public Health, Minister of Planning and Territorial Management, and Minister of Social Affairs respectively (Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014, p. 204). Yaou Aïssatou was the first President of the Women Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement (WCPDM). Three years later, and precisely on May 16, 1988, she was appointed Minister of Social and Women Affairs from February 1985 until April 2000, when she was replaced after 16 years uninterrupted. She has remained national president of the WCPDM, and her closeness to the First Lady Chantal Biya has made her gain the confidence of the executive (DeLancey *et al.*, 2010: 47; Abwa and Tchunkam, 2014, p. 204). Apart from serving as Secretary of State for Public Health, Mrs Isabelle Bassong was also assistant Secretary for Press, Information and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the CPDM party. Thanks to the confidence bestowed on her by the executive, she was Cameroon's ambassador to the Benelux countries from 1988 to 2006, when she died and went to the world beyond (DeLancey *et al.*, 2010, p. 64).

Three other women who provided sterling political leadership in Cameroon were Rose Zanguélé, Catherine EkoNgomba, and Elizabeth Tankeu. Apart from her appointment as Minister of Planning and Territorial Management, Elizabeth Tankeu also served on the executive board of the African Capacity Building Foundation prior to her appointment as a Commissioner in 2003. She was Commissioner for Trade and Industry of the African Union (AU) and used this position to vigorously fight for African ownership of its resources and for fairness in trade practices with other countries and regions of the world (Joiner, 2011, p. 2; Tankeu, 2016, p. 281). She died—in active service—in 2011. Currently, more women are involved in leadership in Cameroon than before, with female-led organizations and institutions that include schools and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs); they lead as female lawyers, teachers, and directors (Atanga, 2010, p. 10). Yet hurdles still exist in women's effective participation in political leadership at the legislative and executive levels.

### **Conclusion**

The evolving role of women in political leadership up to and through the 2013 elections is clear. This study highlighted the situation of women in decision-making positions in Cameroon prior to independence and reunification in 1960-61 but more importantly after. It has also examined women's political leadership in indigenous institutions in Cameroon and proven that there were fundamental changes to gender leadership roles from the colonial era onwards.

The nature and character of women's participation in decision-making and political leadership in Cameroon since independence and reunification are product of the political structure of the country, the nature of politics, local tradition, and the economic empowerment of women. While a few women were co-opted into political institutions like parliament and political parties, others like UDEFEC fought for their recognition and influence in shaping the destiny of the country. The few politically influential women behaved almost in the same way as their male counterparts. Others occupied political positions merely for a façade within Cameroon's patriarchal political environment. Even the eventual liberalization of the political space in 1990 did not radically change an overriding mentality about women's participation in political leadership, gains notwithstanding. Many of the women councillors, parliamentarians, and appointees, like the men, represent themselves. Progress has obviously been made, but a lot still has to be done to promote women's greater participation in political leadership. In turn, these women must also provide political education to their kind, with the aim of encouraging them to venture into leadership at both the legislative and executive levels.

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