



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Council Development Plans in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon

**Niyng Roger Mbihbih**

Assistant Lecturer, Department of Women and Gender Studies,  
University of Buea, Cameroon

**Joyce B. Mbongo Endeley**

Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies,  
University of Buea, Cameroon

### **Abstract:**

*Gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) have been identified at the global, regional, national and local levels as an indicator of sustainable development. From the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action gender mainstreaming in analysis, policy and practice emerged as the linchpin of neo-liberal development. In the decades that followed, the emphasis on GEWE has been reinforced by overwhelming consensus that gender inequality and wide gender gaps across all sectors inadvertently deprives women and girls from enjoying development benefit on the same basis as men and boys. Cognizant of the necessity to scale-up inclusive development as promoted by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa's Agenda 2063, as well as Cameroon's Vision 2035, mainstreaming gender in public institutions such as local councils has been ramped up. Local councils therefore emerge as an appropriate site to carry out analysis on how gender equality and women's empowerment are mainstreamed. This paper examines how selected local councils in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment in local development programmes. The paper employed a convergent parallel mixed method research design in which 215 questionnaires were administered, 8 interviews conducted, and 2 Focused Group Discussions (FGD) were organised. The findings revealed that mainstreaming gender equality was not vigorously pursued as a policy option by local councils despite recognition of the fact that wide gender disparities persist between women and men in local councils. Turning to women's empowerment, the study discovered that local development interventions did not approach women's empowerment from a transformatory perspective. Rather, women's empowerment was predominantly operationalised in terms of access to basic needs such as farming inputs. The paper recommends among other things that mainstreaming gender and women's empowerment should be integrated at all levels in council development programmes in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon.*

**Keywords:** Council development plan, gender equality, local council, mainstreaming, women's empowerment

### **1. Introduction**

Consensus by feminist scholars (Kim, 2017; Kabeer, 2005; Sen, 2015) and development organizations (World Bank, 2012; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016; United Nations [UN], 2012) reveals that Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) are important strategies to reduce gender gaps between men and women and leverage development outcomes in the present context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, Miles (2016) and Kabeer (2005) asserts that gender equality is an instrumental goal, which is important in its own right. Despite this realization, the plethora of interventions deployed at the global, regional and national levels to promote GEWE have faltered in terms of addressing gender disparities across all sectors (World Bank 2017, 2012, 2001; UNDP, 2016). This is particularly disturbing seeing that gender inequality has far reaching consequences ranging from micro to macro levels and from the personal to the political. As an illustration, data reveals that in the labour market, sub-Saharan Africa incurred losses of about '90 billion USD annually between 2010 and 2014, peaking at 105 billion in 2014' (UNDP 2016:4). African economies can hardly afford such leak ages considering the resource challenges plaguing the continent in its quest for sustainable development. Moreover, statistics like the one cited above are the norm rather than the exception; yet this negative situation can be easily redressed if most interventions address the multidimensional aspects of gender inequality. Unfortunately, the majority of development interventions mainly concentrate on niche areas, failing for the most part to consider the multidimensional implications of gender inequality.

Up to the present decade, many interventions have been initiated to redress the imbalance or glacial representation of women in development structures and interventions. Razavi and Miller (1995) argue that the United

Nations (UNs) decade for women (1976-1985) played a crucial role in drawing attention to the contributions of women in development. In fact, the role and importance of women particularly as it concerns their reproductive, productive and communal engagements have increasingly influenced development planning and discourse (Moser, 1993:58). In general, the Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) silos of feminist engagement can be identified in this regard which have placed emphasis on the policy of mainstreaming gender (Ibid).

Gender Mainstreaming (GM) can therefore be described as one if not the as the most effective strategies to reduce disparities in development practice and outcomes (Crusmac, 2015; Chant and Gutmann, 2000). As a prominent fixture in development rhetoric and practice, GM can be traced to the 1995 Beijing Conference (Moser & Moser, 2005). According to Moser and Moser (2005) the Beijing conference ensured that GM was popularized with the implication that it will be embraced as an innovative and effective strategy to integrate gender equality in development interventions as well as engender development at all levels (Tadros, 2015). As a result, the policy has gained traction in development agencies and structures as a policy approach; these structures have increasingly stream lined GM features into their structures, policies and programmes/interventions. This pro-GM thrust at the global level has inadvertently influenced policy reactions at the regional and national levels. At the regional level, Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU) as well as other regional instruments such as the Maputo protocol envisages the attainment of gender equality and the promotion of women's empowerment in the socio-political, economic and cultural domains. This commitment to gender equality can be observed by the pro-gender stance adopted within the AU and outwardly in terms of its policy interventions and gender-parity institutional representation. It can be reasonably asserted that Africa through the 'AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2018-2028' is committed to mainstream gender in the policies, programmes and interventions at the regional level. However, while evidence indicates that GM has been reasonably embraced at the policy level, the same cannot be said with regards to observable and measurable outcomes as evidenced by the prevalence of wide gender disparities in most if not all sectors, as well as within the AU itself.

Within the context of Cameroon, it is important to state at the onset that progress towards reducing gender gaps in all sectors has been slow, uneven and remains significantly lacking (Tripp et al., 2009). While the country has committed to gender equality and has made strides to integrate it in its development interventions, the outcomes have hardly been satisfactory. Across the board (social, economic, legal, political, and cultural) gender disparities persist with current trends foreshadowing grim prospects for the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment as well as meeting the lofty gender targets outlined in the country's National Gender Policy (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family-MINFOPRA, 2011). Apart from an ambitious National Gender Policy which captures the gender objectives of Vision 2035 and outlines gender targets to be attained by 2035, very little progress of significance has been recorded in the domain of gender equality and women's empowerment in Cameroon. The stalled status of gender equality in Cameroon is particularly perplexing considering that:

Cameroon responded to the UN push to create national machineries for women by forming in 1975 a women's unit within the Ministry of Social Affairs. Almost a decade later in 1984, Cameroon was one of the first countries to create a separate Ministry for Women's Affairs (MINCOF)<sup>1</sup>, prior to the UN Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985. (Tripp et al., 2009:188).

While these policies have been lauded, evidence does not support the claim that meaningful and transformative outcomes regarding the mainstreaming of GEWE have been realized. This observation is particularly glaring in local councils in Cameroon.

Apart from the multifaceted challenges impeding the process of decentralization in Cameroon (see Cheka 2008, 2007; Mback 2007; Gemandze 1994) the near to complete absence of GM as a strategy of inclusive local governance poses a serious challenge towards the sustainable inclusion of women in council interventions. This is particularly relevant because women (as well as men) are more predisposed to participate at local rather than national levels of government (Evertzen, 2001) and local development interventions are more predisposed to engage citizens on a direct basis hence, ensuring more holistic and participative local governance. Thirdly, the emphasis on bottom-up participatory governance for sustainable development is compromised when a vital component of the population (women) are not appropriately encouraged to participate in the process of local decision making and development planning/implementation. Moreover, Cameroon's adherence to global instruments and other commitments entails that the promotion and mainstreaming of GEWE at all levels ought to be the norm and a core responsibility of the state. However, this is hardly the case, seeing that the integration of women's concerns in development processes/activities at the local level remains lacking, particularly when construed within a context of women's strategic gender needs and interests.

A closer look at Cameroonian society demonstrates that like men, women have made headway in terms of political representation and participation (Fonjock & Endeley, 2013). This implies that women have become more visible in cabinet /elective positions and are more likely to use their voice and agency in the decision making process at all levels. However, the robust participation and representation of women in decision making at the local council level can be described as descriptive rather than substantive (Ibid). Based on the paucity of women decision makers at the national level, some authors (see Ofei-aboagye 2000; Evertzen 2001; Kabeer 2005; Moser 1993) argue that women stand a better chance of gaining a foothold in local decision-making processes. This view has been supported by the International Union of Local Authorities (1998), Evertzen (2001) and UN-HABITAT, (2008).

It is therefore imperative to examine how women's empowerment and gender equality are mainstreamed in the Council Development Plans (CDPs) of selected councils in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. Such an

<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MINCOF) is now referred to as the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF) having been renamed in 2004 by a presidential decree.

analysis is important considering the proximate, pertinent and strategic importance of local councils in satisfying the daily needs of local populations (Evertzen, 2001; UN-HABITAT, 2001). Similarly, the centrality of councils in democratic processes with regards to political participation, decision making and accountable governance cannot be overemphasized. Particularly, the significance of the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action (BPA) and subsequent pro-gender instruments developed to advance the status of women justify our quest to gain a better understanding of policy prescriptions regarding mainstreaming GEWE. From the foregoing, local councils emerge as appropriate sites to investigate and understand how gender mainstreaming—a core recommendation of the BPA and a linchpin of Cameroon's National Gender Policy—has been pursued as a policy option and strategy to leverage gender disparities between women and men within the context of CDPs in the NW and SW regions of Cameroon.

## 2. Research Context and Methodology

Mainstreaming GEWE in local councils in Cameroon remains a daunting task even though its relevance cannot be overemphasized. As previously mentioned, councils represent that level of government which is closest to the people designed to meet their daily needs and implement national development objectives. To translate national sustainable development aspirations into achievable and measurable outcomes, local councils in Cameroon have been mandated to develop CDPs to articulate the 'goals, objectives, actions, and activities that' local council desire to pursue within a particular period (Santa Council, 2011:2). CDPs are therefore programs and activities formulated and implemented by local councils that aim to improve the lives of local populations in the socio-political, economic and cultural spheres over a defined period and which align with national development objectives. The thrust of this paper examines how GEWE is mainstreamed in CDPs in selected councils in two out of the ten regions of Cameroon; the North West (NW) and the South West (SW) regions.

The NW and SW regions came into existence with presidential decree No. 2008/376 of 12 November 2008 which transformed the former 10 provinces of the country into 10 regions. Prior to this, the NW and SW regions existed as one of two federated states in Cameroon's Federal Republic which lasted from 1961-1972 ([http://www.clgf.org.uk/default/assets/File/Country\\_profiles/Cameroon.pdf](http://www.clgf.org.uk/default/assets/File/Country_profiles/Cameroon.pdf)). Prior to the federal period, the territory was made up of what is today referred to as former British Southern Cameroons, having experienced mandate and trusteeship status with Britain as the colonial administrator (Ngoh, 1979). In terms of spatial delimitation, the NW region has a surface area of 17,812 km and a population density of 103 inhabitants per square kilometer (United Councils and Cities of Cameroon [UCCC], 2014). According to a 2014 population estimate, the NW region is the fourth most populated region in Cameroon with a population size of 2,133,258 inhabitants (Ibid) even though massive exodus from the region as a result of insecurity since 2016 has seriously depopulated the region. The administrative setup of the NW region is made up of seven divisions and 34 sub-divisions with the latter serving as local council units. The SW region on the other hand, has a surface area of 25,410 km with a population of about 1,708,371 ([www.clgf.org.uk/cameroon](http://www.clgf.org.uk/cameroon)). Administratively, the capital of the SW region is located in Buea which is the headquarters of Fako division. The region is made up six divisions and 31 subdivisions.

The methodology employed for this study relied on a convergent parallel mixed method design (Creswell, 2009) and utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. In particular, the approach permitted the researcher to adopt multiple approaches of data collection such as questionnaires, in-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) in addressing the problematic of the research which Burke, Onwuegbuzie, and Lisa (2007) concur with. Furthermore, the convergent parallel mixed method enabled the use of both qualitative and quantitative data which permitted a better investigation of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). From an estimated population of 2500 councilors distributed across 13 divisions and 65 subdivisions, 441 councilors constituted the target population from which a simple random sample of 215 councilors were selected from 13 councils with six councils from the SWR and seven councils from the NWR as represented on Table 1.

| Region      | Council     | No. of Councilors |     |       | Sample Size |     |       | Key Informant | FGD |
|-------------|-------------|-------------------|-----|-------|-------------|-----|-------|---------------|-----|
|             |             | F                 | M   | Total | F           | M   | Total |               |     |
| NWR         | Bamenda I   | 10                | 21  | 31    | 6           | 12  | 18    | 1             |     |
|             | Bamenda II  | 9                 | 22  | 31    | 6           | 18  | 24    | 1             |     |
|             | Bamenda III | 10                | 21  | 31    | 8           | 18  | 26    | 2             | 1   |
|             | Santa       | 11                | 30  | 41    | 4           | 18  | 22    |               |     |
|             | Belo        | 9                 | 31  | 40    | 0           | 7   | 7     |               |     |
|             | Tubah       | 12                | 28  | 40    | 3           | 9   | 12    |               |     |
| Total       | 6           | 61                | 153 | 214   | 27          | 82  | 109   | 4             | 1   |
| SWR         | Limbe 1     | 7                 | 18  | 25    | 4           | 12  | 16    | 1             | 1   |
|             | Limbe 2     | 8                 | 17  | 25    | 4           | 8   | 12    |               |     |
|             | Tiko        | 11                | 29  | 40    | 5           | 20  | 25    | 1             |     |
|             | Buea        | 14                | 26  | 40    | 8           | 10  | 18    | 2             |     |
|             | Kumba I     | 11                | 20  | 31    | 4           | 11  | 15    |               |     |
|             | Kumba II    | 9                 | 22  | 31    | 2           | 8   | 10    |               |     |
|             | Muyuka      | 7                 | 28  | 35    | 3           | 7   | 10    |               |     |
| Total       | 7           | 67                | 160 | 227   | 30          | 76  | 106   |               | 1   |
| Grand Total | 13          |                   | 441 |       |             | 215 |       | 8             | 2   |

Table 1: Distribution of Sample Size  
Source: Author, 2020

- Total number of council targeted =13
- Target population = 441
- Sample population =215 (57 females and 158 males)
- Number of interviews conducted=8 (3 males and 5 females)
- Number of Focused Group Discussions=2

### 3. Debates on Mainstreaming, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Raging debates continue to animate scholarship and research in the fields of mainstreaming, gender equality and women's empowerment. Consensus on these debates is hardly evident, even though the objective of research and recommendations lays emphasis on leveraging gender disparities between women and men and ensuring that gender equality prevails between the sexes at all levels. Mainstreaming is a concept and a policy approach that is most often associated with gender and has been besieged by ambiguity in theory as well as in practice (Crusmac, 2015; Milward, Mukhopadhyay, & Wong, 2015; Moser & Moser, 2005). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines mainstreaming gender as 'the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting gender equality between women and men, and combating discrimination' (EIGE, 2016:5). Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) draws inspiration from the definition provided by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to conceptualise mainstreaming gender equality as:

...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (Pearson 2006:3).

Also, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) from whence GM was popularized views the latter as 'a strategy to enhance the impact of policies to promote gender equality.' Likewise, the United Nations, observes that 'the goal of this strategy is to incorporate a gender perspective in all legislation, policies, programmes and projects' (1995:221). Interestingly, the applicability and effectiveness of GM has not been as effortless as the framers and gender activist would want. As an illustration, Crusmac, (2015) argues that GM does not seem quite adequate to ensure a transformation of gender relations and ensure gender equality. Crusmac also notes that feminism has been replaced by GM on a discursive and policy basis with the justification that this replacement stems primarily from the contentious frame in which feminism is viewed as opposed to the non-confrontational nature of GM.

On her part, Sharma (2000) argues that the current state of Women's Empowerment (WE) is in need of reformulation. According to this author, WE is off base with what she calls the fundamentals of women's issues especially in the global south (India in particular). According to Sharma two approaches can be identified in addressing gender inequities between women and men: the women's development perspective which can be directly traced to Esther Boserup's 1970 seminal work on women, and the empowerment perspective, an offshoot of the 1995 Beijing conference (see Moser 1993). Sharma stresses that so far, development strategies have ignored women 'and actually served to reinforce existing gender inequalities' (2000:20). Despite this, it is her assessment that the development and empowerment approaches are dialectically linked and their categorization will depend on whether one is solely focused on the economic (development) or empowerment (political) planes. The latter perspectives aligns with the realization that empowerment has become a buzzword (Batliwala, 2007) and wide disparities between its theoretical and practical dimensions exist (Sida, 2001). Furthermore, Sharma (2000) notes that there is urgent need to engage a dispassionate critique of the 'infirmities' of empowerment (2000:25). This critique is done from three perspectives; liberal, structural and cultural (Ibid).

From the liberal dimension, empowerment is lampooned because of its exclusionary bias, confrontational predisposition and subversive tendency (Batliwala, 2007). The exclusionary dimension stems from the overemphasis on women without factoring in the role of men (Ajasa, 2015). In fact, Sharma (2000) suggests that in the quest to give women agency, the empowerment approach has inadvertently isolated women from men and vice versa seeing that the majority of interventions, seminars and activities concerning empowerment are dominated by women. As such, men have been alienated from empowerment and by extension view gender equity/equality as the concern of women (Chant and Gutmann, 2000). Turning to its confrontational predisposition, it will seem that from the narrow application of empowerment, men are projected as the adversaries of women, rather than their partners. And culturally, Sharma (2000) again notes that the empowerment approach is criticized for its western bias, blindness to other cultural norms (such as that of India within the context of her study) and a chronic inability to consider extant linkages between religion and gender relations (Mohanty, 1984). Sharma argues that the pervasiveness of western norms in empowerment renders the concepts vulnerable to the trap of essentialism. By using western standards of gender relations as a universal template, generalizations which fail to capture context based specificities regarding the status of women are ignored.

In another dimension, women's empowerment has been predominantly dominated by a preference for economic empowerment. To widen this narrow conception of WE, Bayissa, Smits, and Ruben (2017) conceptualise WE by correlating the economic dimension to the familial, psychological, legal, political and socio-cultural dimensions. While emphasizing that literature in the domain has disproportionately focused on the economic dimension to the exclusion of others (see Endeley, 2001; Nana-Fabu, 2006), the authors observe that it is necessary to examine how economic empowerment interacts with the other dimensions cited above.



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Profile of Councillors

The profile of councillors considered for this paper was categorized according to sex, age, education, occupation and marital status. From this categorisation, the findings revealed that 25 percent of councillors were women while 75 percent were men. Analyzing the distribution of councillors by sex, it was obvious that female councillors are highly underrepresented in council structures; this aligns with previous research which has established that the predominant gender in local government are male. The results from this sample also represent sex distribution trends in the general population of councillors in Cameroon who are overwhelmingly dominated by men (over 70 percent representation). In fact, women councillors constitute less than 30 percent falling short of the threshold recommended for women in structures of decision making. From these results, it can be surmised that the under-representation of female councillors has serious implications with regards to inclusive governance and engendered development outcomes in the studied population.

Going by the age group of the councillors, the greatest proportion (55.3 percent) of councillors were clustered around the 41-50 years age bracket. The second most represented age groups were between 51-60 years of age. Respondents aged 60 years and above were the least, making up less than six percent of the sampled population. Finally, 9.3 percent of respondents were aged between 31-40 years of age. This implies that the majority of councillors are of middle age and ought to be more or less liberal in their understanding of gender norms.

Educationally, the profile of councillors ranged from primary education to tertiary levels. It was observed that 65.1 percent of councillors have educational qualifications below the first degree. This revealed that the majority of councillors had not attended school beyond the secondary level. With regards to post-secondary education, 27 percent of respondents had a first degree, and 3.3 percent of councillors possessed a masters' degree; the rest (4.7 percent) held assorted educational qualifications. It can be surmised from these results that councillors consulted for this study were adequately educated and were capable of understanding the concepts considered for this study.

With regards to occupation, 30.2 percent of councillors were civil servants, while 23.3 percent were engaged in private sector activities. Another 15.8 percent and 22.3 percent of councillors indicated that they were engaged in self-employment, farming and other related activities respectively. It is important to point out that, a significant cross section of the councillors indicated that they were involved in agricultural activities from time to time.

Results further revealed that 81.9 percent of the councillors are married while 14.6 percent were single. Also, 13 percent of councillors are widowed; 3.7 percent are single-never been married, while 0.9 percent are divorced. It can be inferred from the results that the popularity of marriage correspond to socio-cultural norms associated to the institution of marriage in Cameroon in general and the NWR and SWR in particular.

### 4.2. Councillors' Understanding of GEWE

Before examining how local councils in the NWR and SWR mainstreamed GEWE in CDPs, it was necessary to gain an appreciation of how local councillors conceptualized GEWE within the context of their council activities. To gain an appreciation of the understanding of gender equality from the perspective of respondents, five indicators which capture gender equality in various degrees were used. The frequency distribution of the indicators are presented in Table 2.

| Understanding Gender Equality   | Responses |       |       |       |        |           |
|---|-----------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-----------|
|   | SD (%)    | D (%) | U (%) | A (%) | SA (%) | Total (%) |
| 1. Women and men are equal as human beings  |           | 0.9   | 2.8   | 41.9  | 53.5   | 95.4      |
| 2. Women and men should face no Discrimination because of their gender              |           | 0.9   | 3.7   | 44.7  | 50.3   | 95        |
| 3. Women and men should have equality of opportunities irrespective of their gender |           |       | 2.3   | 52.1  | 43.7   | 95.8      |
| 4. There should be gender equality in the application of laws                       |           | 0.9   | 4.2   | 52.1  | 42.8   | 94.9      |
| 5. Women should be reserved at least 30% of all leadership positions                | 5.6       | 26.5  | 14.9  | 33.5  | 19.5   | 53        |

Table 2: Distribution of Councilor Understands of Gender Equality

Source: Generated from Field Data, 2020

Valid n=215

From the results presented in Table 2, of four of five indicators at least 95 percent of respondents positively rated gender equality with regards to their understanding of the concept. On the whole, the respondents agreed to the different concepts of GE, implying that the vast majority of councillors understand what GE stands for. With regards to the first indicator, 41.9 percent and 53.5 percent agreed and strongly agreed that despite differences in sex, men and women are equal. As concerns the second indicator respondents noted that people should not suffer any form of discrimination as a result of their sex and should equally benefit from development intervention; 44.7 percent and 50.3 percent agreed and strongly agreed with this view respectively. In addition, more than half of the respondents (52.1 percent) agreed while 43.7 percent strongly agreed that accessing opportunities in societies should not be predicated on sex. Furthermore, equal access and treatment before the law was positively rated by a significant majority of the respondents with 52.1 percent

and 42.8 percent strongly agreeing and agreeing respectively. Finally, with regards to whether women should be reserved at least 30 percent representation in local councils, only 33.5 percent and 19.5 percent of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with this view.

To further clarify their responses, findings from interviews and FGDs also revealed that councillors had an impressive understanding of GE. As an illustration, a councillor explained that *'differences in sex should not constitute any form of discrimination'* (Interview with Female Councillor, R153, 7 December 2019). Correspondingly, another respondent underscored that *'women and men are all born equal despite differences in sex and so, should enjoy all privileges and rights'* (Interview with Male Councillor, R85, 12 November 2019). Perhaps, one of the most profound elaborations which pertain to an understanding of GE as presented by a respondent noted that *'The present fluid situation has led to a misconception about gender equality. The conventional view of gender equality is social not biological'* Interview with Male Councillor, R126, 12 November 2019).

In order to assess the knowledge of councillors vis-à-vis WE, respondents were similarly asked to define WE. The objective was to determine whether respondents were capable of identifying indicators associated with women's empowerment. As such, the definitions provided were classified into four sub-categories of power (Rowland, 1997) as follows; (1) Power within; (2) Power to; (3) Power over; and (4) Power with. Findings (Table 3) demonstrate that the majority of respondents (26.5percent) understood empowerment as 'power within', while 21.9 percent understood empowerment in terms of 'power to'. In all, a significant majority of respondents were able to associate WE with an understanding of growth or development of women either as individuals or as a group.

| Opinion           | n   | %    |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Power within      | 57  | 26.5 |
| Power to          | 47  | 21.9 |
| Power with        | 54  | 25.1 |
| Power over        | 38  | 17.7 |
| None of the above | 19  | 8.8  |
| Total             | 215 | 100  |

Table 3: Distribution of Councillors' Knowledge on Meaning of WE

Source: Generated from Field Data, 2020

Valid n=215

To provide more context, a key informant conceptualized WE as *'...the operational autonomy of women in the various domains: social, economic, and political'* (Interview with Female Councillor, R178, 7 December 2019), while another understood the concept as *'giving women the training and skills needed to enable them take part in the social, economic, political, and cultural activities'* (Interview with Female Councillor, R153, 7 December 2019).

#### 4.3. Mainstreaming Gender Equality in CDPs

The findings of this study have so far revealed among other things that local councillors considered for this study possess an appreciable level of understanding with regards to GEWE. That notwithstanding, the findings of this study revealed that the majority of local councils in the study area overwhelmingly implemented a gender neutral approach in the formulation of their council development plans. This could be observed at the level of responses from the survey questionnaires, key informant interviews, FGDs and critical content analysis of CDP. While respondents overwhelmingly conceded that gender inequality was prevalent in the society, CDPs hardly considered the formulation of concrete policies to leverage gender disparities between women and men. This may be attributed to the fact that the institutional structure of local councils have not been reformed to facilitate or foster the mainstreaming of gender equality. Even though councillors were gender aware, gender as a development policy tool was not adequately considered in defining development objectives in almost all CDPs. From findings it was discovered that the political will on the part of council officials to ensure that gender equality was mainstreamed in CDPs was lacking. Despite the recommendations of the national gender policy which mandates and recommends GM in all development interventions, as well as an active civil society community mobilizing for gender equality at the local level, there is little evidence to suggest that these measures have propelled the mainstreaming of gender equality as a priority in CDP. An analysis of selected CDP revealed the following aspects.

Firstly, it was discovered that gender analysis and a gender approach did not constitute part of the formulation phase of these plans. For example, the researcher discovered that selected CDPs were mostly gender blind at most and neutral at the least. A gender lens analysis of the majority of council development plans revealed that gender tools such as gender planning, gender training, gender budgeting, gender responsive programming, gender disaggregated data, gender needs assessment, among others were hardly considered in the elaboration and formulation phases of CDPs. In fact, gender was most often grafted on or integrated on already existing interventions.

Secondly, incorporation of issues such as quota reservations for women and other gender affirmative action measures could not be identified in these CDPs. More often than not, requirements mandating gender representativeness in party list during elections did not automatically translate to policy outcomes in CDPs. This could be attributed to the fact that female councillors constituted less than 30 percent in a majority of local councils consulted for this study (a microcosm of a national picture). It was discovered that female councillors did not numerically surpass men in any council in the study. Regarding mayors, the majority of deputy mayors were women with only a handful being the mayor who enjoyed executive authority. From the findings, it was further discovered that female councillors are marginally

represented from a numerical perspective, and are even less visible in positions of leadership at committee levels. Also, local councils did not possess clear guidelines regarding the integration of gender equality in CDPs. Rather, CDPs which made reference to gender made so on a 'stand-alone' basis. For example, Buea council which cites gender the most in its CDP addresses it as distinct and separate from other local development activities such as 'Train council and field support staff on gender mainstreaming and family protection' (Buea Council Development Plan, 2012:39). In the same vein, the CDP of Bamenda III council views gender as a separate issue distinct and separate from other local development interventions. While evidence suggests that the participation of women and men in local activities is considered an important issue, it is also logical to argue that the need to consider women as a historically disadvantaged group vis-à-vis development planning was ostensibly absent in the majority of CDPs examined.

Finally, the argument that CDPs were formulated according to the principle of the 'greatest good for the greatest number' only serves to mask women's historical disadvantage and men's advantage with regards to development planning and implementation with particular emphasis at the local level. Interestingly, the domination by men of council interventions is reinforced as very little is done to offset the status-quo of gender blind and neutral CDP. In fact, a critical look at CDPs reveals its gender neutral to gender blind orientation. In their current state, it is inconceivable to hope that these plans are capable of responding to women's strategic and substantive gender needs, as well as meeting the national gender targets as outlined by the national gender policy and Vision 2035.

#### 4.4. Mainstreaming Women's Empowerment in CDPs

In another dimension, results in this study revealed that the majority of CDPs address women empowerment under the rubric 'Women Empowerment and the Promotion of the Family'. In addition, a committee on Women and Youths exist in local councils in the study area. Respondents opined that local council carry out a variety of programmes outlined in their CDPs which aim to empower women at the local level. The majority of these interventions focused on providing local women with resources such as farm inputs as well as targeted but limited trainings and seminars on a variety of themes. For example, the CDP of Santa Council like the majority of other CDPs studied identify a wide range of women's empowerment activities. Within this conceptualization and understanding of empowerment the observable approach to WE lay emphasis on economic empowerment by local councils going by discussions from interviews and FGDs. The emphasis on the economic dimension of empowerment is seen from the easy association of the concept to economic activities by respondents. The foregoing view was corroborated by interview sessions and FGDs in which the majority of interviewees and participants immediately linked empowerment to monetary and economic related activities such as business grants, allocation of farming inputs, trainings in economic entrepreneurship, among others. As an illustration, interviews in Bamenda III council and Buea council respectively revealed the following views:

In fact, last year or year before last, whenever we are elaborating our budget, you will always hear empowering women's groups, empowering youth groups. There are many women's groups in Bamenda III and the council always supports these groups financially, by offering farming equipment to them. Also, they [women] are not only supported, but seminars are organized in which women are trained on the appropriate use of the farming equipment and techniques. This shows that Bamenda III council has a special interest with regards to women. Also, in the course of interacting with women, it is possible to identify active women within them who can be convinced to join politics and occupy leadership positions in the council.

(Interview with Male Councilor R85, 12 November 2019)

There is what we call the economic empowerment of the woman program, wherein women's groups are identified and provided with grants. Emphasis is usually placed on vulnerable groups. What is unique about these programs is that the women are not only given fish, but are taught how to fish. This means that women are given farming inputs such as hoes, insecticides, among others and in some instances are taught how to manufacture organic fertilizers for their farming activities. Perhaps, the most notable instance or high point in which Buea council comes in very strong can be evaluated by the number of activities the council implements in the build-up to women's day activities. For example, the council usually sponsors a football match, organizes workshops and supports vulnerable women in one way or another. In addition, during widow's day celebrations, the council purchases equipment and distributes to widows. As an illustration, during widow's day celebration in 2018, a widows' market was organized in which there were exhibitions. During rural women's day celebrations, rural women are supported with a lot of agricultural materials. In a year, there are a lot of activities geared towards the economic empowerment of the woman.

(Interview with Female Councilor, R153, 7 December 2019)

## 5. Discussion of Results

The findings pertaining to understanding GEWE reveal that councillors in the NW and SW Regions in Cameroon are aware of the meaning of GEWE. In fact, from the findings, it is possible to conclude that knowledge about GEWE is widespread among the sampled councillors, particularly among the female councillors even though they constitute a numerical minority. Despite this awareness, mainstreaming of GEWE in CDPs does not occupy center stage at the level of local development planning. By implication, the language of formulation as well as the strategies identified demonstrate that CDP have hardly been engendered by mainstreaming GEWE at the level of CDP. Since, CDP can be described as gender neutral to gender blind, it can as well be inferred that either by design or inadvertently, men continue to dominate development planning at the level of councils in the NW and SW regions if not Cameroon in general. Evertzen (2001) has argued that when local development processes are not engendered, the consequences are disastrous for local development and inclusive governance. In light of this, one can argue that the availability of awareness on GEWE by councillors in the

NW and SW regions has not been able to offset androcentric notions of local development planning and the institutional arrangements charged with such a planning. A fundamental question that arises from the above analysis is; why do CDP barely mainstream GEWE especially as it is a well-accepted notion?

With regards to the mainstreaming of GEWE, analysis from this study reveal that CDPs approach gender equality from a descriptive perspective and operationalize WE in terms of access and welfare. Kabeer (2015) and Bayissa et al., (2017) have respectively argued that, addressing GE from a descriptive perspective and operationalizing WE at the levels of access and welfare does not suffice. Bayissa et al., (2017) further argue that for WE to be truly empowering, it should be multidimensional in its approach and scope. This view is also corroborated by previous research findings from Endeley (2001) who noted that there was an over-emphasis on development planners to think of WE solely in economic terms. In fact, the Longwe framework recommends that development interventions which focus on WE should consider the higher levels of WE such as conscientization, participation and control; which are more predisposed to offset unequal gender relations of power in society (March et al., 1999).

On the whole, findings revealed that selected councils approached GE from a descriptive representation of women as opposed to men, while WE was operationalized and understood in term of women's socio-economic welfare and their access to the latter. These findings corroborates those of Cornwall, (2016), Batliwala, (2007) and Endeley, (2001) who concluded that the concept of WE has been increasingly operationalized along economic terms, primarily from the levels of access and welfare as per the Longwe framework (March et al., 1999). On the contrary, inadequate or little attention is attributed to other levels such as conscientization, participation and control. Without targeting the latter three levels, women's control over productive resources as opposed to men becomes untenable. Particularly, the control level of empowerment is indispensable if WE interventions are to be transformative as noted by Cornwall (2016). Despite this argument, the fact that WE is targeted predominantly in economic terms and at the access and welfare levels may be a catalyst to other forms of WE such as political, social, legal and cultural.

In another dimension, a gender analysis of the positioning of women and men in council committees revealed that women were mostly members of social and cultural committees while men could be located in more technical committees (Tripp et al., 2009; Adams, 2006). As concerned the roles performed by women and men, the findings showed that women's leadership roles in local development interventions more often than not tended to reflect their domestic roles, an observation previously made by Fonjock and Endeley (2013). In addition, from the findings it observed that only a token percentage of women feature as committee heads in committees which have been traditionally occupied by men such as works and infrastructure. This validates the Brush's (2003) observation that women find it difficult to gain a foothold in domains traditionally defined as masculine. The foregoing view reveals the extent to which gender equality and women's empowerment are indispensable towards leveraging sustainable development which is the end goal of CDPs in local councils studied and in Cameroon.

## 6. Conclusion

Local councils in the study area in particular and Cameroon in general have begun to ensure, albeit timidly, that sustainable development objectives such as gender equality and women's empowerment feature in their CDPs. Apart from the fact that GEWE ensures inclusive good governance at the local level, they are also indispensable strategies to leverage the development playing field across the board. In fact, from the findings of this study local councils have identified 'tailor made' interventions meant to address the basic needs of women such as offering farming inputs as well as working with women's groups. These strategies target the reduction of gender inequalities between the sexes and the (economic) empowerment of women. It is logical that since agriculture constitutes the main economic activity in the study sample, councils interventions will seek to achieve impact in those areas. This evidenced by the emphasis on material and financial support from local councils which are agriculture oriented. However, the prevalent approach regarding the integration of women's concerns in CDPs as opposed to those of men can be categorized under the welfare silo of the WID approach. The emphasis on the access and welfare levels are typical and prominent features of the WID approach. Contrarily, gender as a strategy of sustainable development recommended by the GAD approach cannot be identified.

In a nutshell, councillors considered for this study strongly support the equal consideration of concerns, interests and needs of men and women in CDP. This positive attitude suggests a support structure at the level of councils to mainstream GEWE in CDPs. However, notions of empowerment which extend to conscientization, participation and control were hardly considered. Additionally, Women's empowerment was mentioned in vague and opaque terms; more often than not it was submerged as a sub-issue with in other major issues. Likewise, gender equality was considered primarily in terms of women's representation (30 percent) in council structures. Little to no effort was made to ensure that a gender approach was used in the formulation and implementation phases of CDPs. Additionally, in using Moser's (1993) gender tool to determine the gender sensitivity of selected CDP, it was discovered that interventions were either gender neutral or gender blind. In no instance could gender disaggregated data be identified in the process of formulated policies, programmes and projects. With regards to mainstreaming GEWE, CDP can be described as descriptive because they lack the capacity to fundamentally transform the unequal gender relations of power which persists in and undergirds local development interventions in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. As such, it can be concluded that CDP hardly mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment in council areas.

## 7. References

- i. Ajasa, F. A. (2015). Educational Gender-Equality and Women Empowerment as Determinants of National Transformation : Implication for Curriculum Development, 23(1), 150–156.



- ii. Batliwala, S. (2007). Taking the power out of empowerment - An experiential account. *Development in Practice*, (January), 12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469559>
- iii. Bayissa, F. W., Smits, J., & Ruben, R. (2017). The Multidimensional Nature of Women's Empowerment: Beyond the Economic Approach. *Journal of International Development*, 30(4), 661–690. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3268>
- iv. Burke, J., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Lisa, T. (2007). Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(2), 112–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224>
- v. Chant, S., & Gutmann, M. (2000). *Mainstreaming Men into Gender-Development: Debates, Reflections, and Experiences*. Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0855984511491111>
- vi. Cheka, C. (2007). The State of the Process of Decentralisation in Cameroon. *Africa Development*, XXXII(2), 181–196.
- vii. Cheka, C. (2008). Traditional Authority at the Crossroads of Governance in Republican Cameroon. *Africa Development*, 33(2), 67–89. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484656>
- viii. Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's Empowerment: What Works? *Journal of International Development*, 359(March), 342–359. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid>
- ix. Crusmac, O. (2015). Why Gender Mainstreaming is not Enough? A Critique to Sylvia Walby's the Future of Feminism. *Romanian Journal of Society & Politics*, 102–117. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=103440313&site=ehost-live>
- x. Endeley, J. B. (2001). Conceptualising Women's Empowerment in Societies in Cameroon: How Does Money Fit In? *Gender and Development*, 9(1), 34–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070127728>
- xi. Evertzen, A. (2001). Gender and Local Governance. SNV-Netherlands Development Organisation. Retrieved from <http://www.gade-gender.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Gender-and-Local-Governance.htm>
- xii. Fonjock, A., & Endeley, J. B. (2013). Women in Anglophone Cameroon: Household Gender Relations and Participation in Local Governance. *African Peace and Conflict Journal*, 6(2), 102–117.
- xiii. Gemandze, B. (1994). The failure of decentralization policy in cameroon: an analysis of the 1974 law on local government reform (1974-1994). Institute of Social Studies.
- xiv. Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender Equality and Women's empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development*, 13(1), 13–25. Retrieved from <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/0589/Kabeer%25202005.pdf>
- xv. Kim, E. (2017). Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals. *Global Social Policy*, 17(2), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018117703444>
- xvi. Mback, C. (2007). One Century of Municipalization in Cameroon: The Miseries of Urban Development. In D. E. and R. Stren (Ed.), *Decentralization and the Politics of Urban Development in West Africa* (pp. 53–77). Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Retrieved from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Stren.pdf>
- xvii. Miles, L. (2016). The Social Relations Approach: Empowerment and Women Factory Workers in Malaysia. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 37(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X14533734>
- xviii. Milward, K., Mukhopadhyay, M., & Wong, F. F. (2015). Gender Mainstreaming Critiques: Signposts or Dead Ends? *IDS Bulletin*, 46(4), 75–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12160>
- xix. Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINFOPRA). (2011). *Cameroon's Gender Policy Document 2011-2020*. Yaounde. Retrieved from <http://www.minproff.cm/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/brochure-anglais-A4-PNG.pdf>
- xx. Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Boundary*, 12(3), 371–391. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>
- xxi. Moser, C. (1993). *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training* (Taylor and). New York: Routledge. Retrieved from <http://en.bookfi.net/book/1147859>
- xxii. Moser, C., & Moser, A. (2005). Gender Mainstreaming Since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions. *Gender and Development*, 13(2), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332283>
- xxiii. Nana-Fabu, S. (2006). An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 148–162. Retrieved from <https://cdn.atrria.nl/ezines/web/JournalofInternationalWomensStudies/2006/November/bridgew/Cameroon.pdf>
- xxiv. Nations, U. (2012). *Gender Equality and Local Governance*.
- xxv. Ngoh, V. J. (1979). *The Political Evolution of Cameroon, 1884-1961*. Portland State University. Retrieved from [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3936&context=open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3936&context=open_access_etds)
- xxvi. Ofei-aboagye, E. (2000). Promoting the Participation of Women in Local Governance and Development: The Case of Ghana. In *European Support for Democratic Decentralization and Municipal Development* (pp. 14–15). Maastricht: ECDPM. Retrieved from <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/DP-18-Promoting-Participation-Women-Local-Governance-Ghana-2000.pdf>
- xxvii. Pearson, R. (2006). Evaluation of gender mainstreaming in undp, (January).
- xxviii. Razavi, S., & Miller, C. (1995). *From WID to GAD : Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse* (No. 1). Geneva. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.1894&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

- xxix. Sen, G. (2015). Gender Equality in the Post-2015 Development Agenda : Lessons from the MDGs. *IDS Bulletin*, 44(5). Retrieved from <http://sci-hub.tw/https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12055>
- xxx. Sharma, S. L. (2000). Empowerment without Antagonism : A Case for Reformulation of Women's Empowerment Approach. *Sociological Bulletin*, 49(1), 19–39. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org/stable/23619887](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23619887)
- xxxi. Sida. (2001). *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice*. (A. Sisask, Ed.), SIDA Studies (3rd ed.). Stockholm: Sida. [https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0493\(1970\)098<0363:VMATKE>2.3.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0493(1970)098<0363:VMATKE>2.3.CO;2)
- xxxii. Tadros, M. (2015). Beyond tinkering with the system: Rethinking gender, power and politics. *Institute of Development Studies*, 46(4), 66–74. Retrieved from [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7733/IDSB\\_46\\_4\\_10.1111-1759-5436.12159.pdf?sequence=1](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7733/IDSB_46_4_10.1111-1759-5436.12159.pdf?sequence=1)
- xxxiii. Tripp, A. M., Casimiro, I., Kwesiga, J., & Mungwa, A. (2009). *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from [www.cambridge.org/9780521879309](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521879309)
- xxxiv. UN-HABITAT. (2001). *Policy Dialogue Series: Women and Urban Governance (No. 1)*. Nairobi. Retrieved from [https://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/2112\\_86354\\_women\\_and\\_urban\\_governance\\_policy\\_paper.pdf](https://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/2112_86354_women_and_urban_governance_policy_paper.pdf)
- xxxv. UN-HABITAT. (2008). *Gender Mainstreaming in Local Authorities: Best Practices*. Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Retrieved from [https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/member\\_publications/gender\\_mainstreaming\\_in\\_local\\_authorities.pdf](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/member_publications/gender_mainstreaming_in_local_authorities.pdf)
- xxxvi. UNDP. (2016). *Africa Human Development Report 2016: Accelerating Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Africa*. New York. Retrieved from [http://www.cm.undp.org/content/dam/cameroon/docs/2016/ahdr-2016/AfHDR\\_Summary\\_lowres.pdf](http://www.cm.undp.org/content/dam/cameroon/docs/2016/ahdr-2016/AfHDR_Summary_lowres.pdf)
- xxxvii. United Nations. (1995). *Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action*. New York. Retrieved from [https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing\\_Declaration\\_and\\_Platform\\_for\\_Action.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf)
- xxxviii. Walby, S. (2002). Feminism in a global era. *Economy and Society*, 31(4), 533–557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0308514022000020670>
- xxxix. World Bank. (2001). *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*. Washington D.C: Oxford University Press, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3341723>
- xl. World Bank. (2012). *Gender equality and Development*. Washington D.C.
- xli. World Bank. (2017). *Gender Equality for Development*. Retrieved October 15, 2018, from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/research/dime/brief/dime-gender-program>