

# ***Gender Equality in Cameroon: Political Participation and Leadership***

---



**Global Conscience Initiative**  
P.O. Box 269  
Storey Building Opp. High Court  
Kumba, Meme, Cameroon  
(237)99579194  
[www.gci-cameroon.org](http://www.gci-cameroon.org)  
[info@gci-cameroon.org](mailto:info@gci-cameroon.org)

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: <i>The Global Push Toward Gender Equality in Politics</i> .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Part One: <i>The Status of Gender Equality and Politics in Cameroon</i> .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Part Two: <i>The CAM's Gender Equality Initiative</i> .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion: <i>Looking Forward</i> .....</b>	<b>10</b>

## **Introduction: The Global Push Toward Gender Equality in Politics**

In 1911, only two countries allowed universal suffrage. Today, nearly every single country in the world gives women the right to vote. This stark contrast of female political rights over the course of a single century reflects the tremendous advances made by women in the political sphere around the world. Currently, twenty women govern their nations as Heads of State<sup>1</sup>, while the number of women holding Parliamentary seats exceeds the critical 30% benchmark in countries like Rwanda, Argentina, Sweden, and Angola.<sup>2</sup> Women make up at least one-third of the judiciary (national, regional, and local courts) in 24 different countries, including 67% in Serbia and 50% in Rwanda.<sup>3</sup> There's also an increase in women serving as executive advisors: for instance, in February 2011, the newly-elected Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan handed out a record 13 ministerial portfolios to female politicians, including the key positions of Minister of Finance and Minister of Petroleum Resources.<sup>4</sup>

First and foremost, this trend toward gender equality in politics is important because it enables greater promotion and protection of women's rights. While the majority of countries in the world signed onto the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action in 1995, insufficient implementation and enforcement of gender-sensitive laws and benchmarks remain barriers to gender equality. Oftentimes, men lack the political will to creatively and concertedly work to solve women's issues. However, when women participate in politics, whether as a lobbying force, as law enforcement officers, or as elected/appointed officials, they have the power to advance and enforce gender-sensitive laws.

The elevation of women around the world to positions of political power can be attributed to the hard work of generations of gender activists and to general social evolution away from gender inequality. However, a new trend in the field of gender equality is also responsible for this socio-political change: one that emphasizes the impact of female welfare on the health of the entire community. In the past, many people perceived the advancement of women's rights to be an issue that only concerned and affected women themselves. Yet, recent years have seen a rejection of this notion in favor of the idea that the welfare of women affects everyone in a particular community—men included. Not only can women protect their rights and welfare through political engagement, but they can also positively impact the lives of men through their participation. Women bring unique talents, passions, and experiences to the decision-making table. Barring them from the political arena stunts social, political, and economic development; their involvement is crucial to any community achieving its developmental potential.

---

<sup>1</sup> As of August 9, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *2011-2012 Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice*. UN Women. 2011. Print. See Annex 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ajayi, Yemi and Ahamefula Ogbu. "Nigeria: Jonathan's Women: Can They Deliver?" *This Day. allAfrica.com*. Web. 2 Feb. 2011.

Despite the exceptional political advances made by women around the world, females still encounter political marginalization and oppression, especially in rural communities. Whether they're denied the right to vote, barred from serving in local government, or discouraged from engaging in advocacy and lobbying, many women still have not realized their political promise and potential. Changing these trends through increased female political participation not only helps women who suffer from gender inequality-derived human rights violations, but assists men whose welfare depends on the empowerment of their female counterparts.

## **Part One: The Status of Gender Equality and Politics in Cameroon**

Over recent years, the Cameroonian government has demonstrated a surface-level commitment to improving women's rights across the country. Cameroon is party to the major international treaties and forums concerning women's rights, including CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action. As such, it constitutionally recognizes gender equality and has actively encouraged women's political participation at a national level. The Cameroonian government supports women's initiatives, in both the Ministry of Women's Affairs as well as several gender-related non-governmental organizations (NGO's).

Unfortunately, social, economic, and political inequality is still a reality for many women across the nation, especially in the rural areas. Women routinely face the oppression of traditionally-prescribed social roles in which they are confined to domestic, farm, and retail work while being simultaneously denied a voice in their families, societies, and local government. There is an overwhelming prejudice on behalf of men—and even women—that females are not competent to assume leadership roles in the community. Instead, women are relegated to proscribed domestic roles in society, a rejection that strips them of their political voice and potential for leadership.<sup>5</sup>

This trend of low participation in politics started during the colonial system, when women had minimal access to education. This lack of education translated into domestic confinement and prohibition from serving in positions of power. In the decades since independence, there have been increasingly more women represented in business, civil society organizations, law, and education; however, there are very few women in national political decision-making positions. Women are grossly underrepresented in national Cameroonian politics: females hold only 23 of 180 seats in the National Assembly and six out of 61 cabinet positions.<sup>6</sup> Out of the 23 candidates that stood for the 2011 Presidential Election, only one, Edith Kabbang Walla, was a woman.<sup>7</sup> Female participation in Cameroonian national politics is instead used to put and keep men in power.<sup>8</sup>



*Edith Kabbang Walla, on the campaign trail in July 2011. Source: Global Press Institute.*

At a local level, women also encounter difficulties in participating and leading in the political arena, due to gender-based prejudice and its expression in local legislative,

<sup>5</sup> Atanga, Lilian Lem. *Gender, Discourse, and Power in the Cameroonian Parliament*. Langaa Research and Publishing CGI: Makon, Bamenda 2010, 96-118.

<sup>6</sup> *2011 Human Rights Report: Cameroon*. US Department of State, 2011, pg. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Mussa, Comfort. "Lone Woman Candidate Eyes Presidency in Cameroon." Global Press Institute, Web. 1 Aug. 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Atanga, 9-11.

executive, and judicial institutions. Due to a lack of government resources and capabilities, women are further underrepresented because official power of the state overlaps and is often dominated by local traditional authority. The traditional political structure consists of male chiefs who rule over a village, tribe, or region, assisted by several family members—sometimes including a Queen Mother. Power is checked by secret societies of males in power and military societies, or vigilante groups. Traditional Councils function as both the legislative and judicial bodies at the local level. These Councils consist almost entirely of male village members who collect taxes and mediate low-level civil disputes (although their decisions are not legally binding under Cameroonian law). Sometimes, there are female societies of elders in the village. These societies have no say in the day-to-day running of political processes, but they do serve as a voice and representation of women from time to time in cases of emergency.<sup>9</sup> As far as village political leadership and participation goes, women are most often seen and not heard.

The lack of women in the key positions of political power at the village level is a strong factor in the host of problems confronting rural women. Traditional prejudices favoring gender inequality and female subjugation often dominate legal decisions, laws, and executive actions. Consequently, issues like economic inequality, the educational gap between girls and boys, violence against women, and the inability for women to own or inherit land remain significant problems for Cameroon's female population.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned previously, enacting gender equality in political participation and leadership just doesn't benefit women, but also the men in any given community. The development of small communities in particular depends on contributions from all members of society; women are no exception. Their participation in local decision-making, whether as lobbyists, law enforcement, or officials, ensures expedient and effective community development. This, in turn, benefits every single person, regardless of gender. In Cameroon, gender equality is a pre-requisite for both rural and urban community development.

---

<sup>9</sup> Atanga, 4-7.

<sup>10</sup> This has been reflected specifically in GCI's surveys and observations in its current partner village, Mofako Bekondo, in July-November 2011.

## **Part Two: The CAM's Gender Equality Initiative**

Gender inequality is a problem for Cameroonian women in the workplace, government, social settings, and the domestic sphere. This inequality is especially prevalent in rural Cameroon, where traditional gender roles dominate social and political life. Consequently, women are routinely denied leadership roles in local government. This lack of female participation routinely leads to stunted community development and strained socio-political relations between village members.

In September 2011, Global Conscience inaugurated the Gender Equality Initiative under the banner of the CAM's Project in order to address female political marginalization at the local level. Although the CAM's Project was originally created to improve local conflict resolution, the Project has since expanded its mission to cover a greater peacebuilding mandate, whereby it seeks to instill practices of good governance on the Traditional Council and improve the ties between community members to achieve a greater collective partnership in community development. Gender inequality is a considerable barrier to those goals, making it a crucial component of the CAM's Project.

The main goal of the Gender Inequality Initiative is to make sure males and females are equally represented in village leadership. In order to accomplish this goal, GCI uses the following steps:

- 1.) **Sensitization**- Given the prevalence of traditional gender stereotypes—in this particular case, those which deny women the standing and capability of serving in positions of political power—sensitization is crucial. Gender stereotypes and subsequent discrimination permeate all sectors of society. In order for women to be trusted and respected in positions of political power, every single member of the community needs to understand and support female political participation. GCI thus delivers Gender Equality workshops to different members of the village: the youth, the Traditional Council, various social groups, etc., tailoring each workshop to the needs of the particular audience.



*GCI's Gender Equality sensitization workshop with the Women's Executive Council in Mofako Bekondo, Mbonge Subdivision, October 2011*

In all of its sensitization workshops across the organization's various programs, GCI aims to train and empower local facilitators to conduct the workshops themselves. This not only instills the workshops with credibility, but it reinforces the main concepts for the facilitators. In the Gender Equality workshops, local women play an important role in presenting topics like women's rights, stereotyping and discrimination, and female education.

2.) **Needs Evaluation and Fulfillment-** The prevalence of gender stereotypes isn't the only barrier to gender equality in political leadership. Other factors may prevent women from assuming their rightful leadership roles alongside the men: unequal access to education, inability for women to serve due to conflicting public and domestic work commitments, etc. To combat these underlying issues, GCI holds needs assessment sessions with different groups of women in the community in order to determine what females need in order to move forward. Together, GCI and the women brainstorm and enact solutions to these different problems.<sup>11 12</sup>



*Sister Edjuan of Mofako Bekondo delivers a segment on women's rights to the men on the Traditional Council, honing in on her public speaking and leadership skills, November 2011*

3.) **Capacity Training-** When GCI targets women to participate in affirmative action, they are already qualified candidates for the position: they are well-respected in the community, they are educated, and they have consistently demonstrated leadership qualities. However, they may lack confidence in their own abilities vis-à-vis the Traditional Council, which makes them vulnerable to male domination and exclusion. So, GCI trains prospective female councilors in coping mechanisms in the face of potential marginalization and leadership techniques while educating them on the organization and practices of the particular political body.

4.) **Affirmative Action-** Once the community is sensitized, the particular women's needs have been met, and the female candidates have been trained, the Chief places a certain amount of women into political positions. However, once the women are in these positions, GCI's work isn't finished. Monitoring and ongoing support are necessary for the success of the Initiative. So, GCI routinely observes council sessions, conducts interviews with the female leaders, and address any problems as they arise.

5.) **Political Participation-** Not every woman will serve on the Traditional Council, but it is nevertheless a crucial part of the Initiative to involve women as much as possible in local politics. This includes attending Council sessions that are open to the public, staying informed about political developments and decisions, and uniting with other women as informal lobbying groups that can advocate for women's rights and interests at the council level. GCI encourages political participation by working with different women's groups in the community to adopt the aforementioned functions.

<sup>11</sup> For example, if there is an educational gap between girls and boys in secondary school education, GCI would possibly create a scholarship fund with the women of the village for girls to attend school.

<sup>12</sup> This phase of the Initiative also involves potential partnership with government and non-government organizations specializing in areas like education and financial entrepreneurship.

Once women hold positions of political power alongside and equal to men, they can more effectively protect their rights and interests. But, even more importantly, by serving their communities as leaders, these women bring crucial voices and ideas to community development, improving the scope and quality of governance while building more peaceful and beneficial partnerships that ultimately advance and benefit the entire village.

## **Conclusion: Looking Forward**

The political advances of women around the world certainly give hope to the situation of empowerment of local women in Cameroon. If countries like Bangladesh and Liberia—where gender inequality remains prevalent—can elect female heads of state, then the tide is turning in the campaign to elevate women to positions of political power. In the 2011, although hindered by a lack of campaign funds and staff (in addition to the structural barriers inherent in the Cameroonian electoral system), Edith Kabbang Walla managed to electrify and mobilize a base of female and male political supporters.<sup>13</sup> Her presence on the national political scene represents the push Cameroonian women are making to break down the political barriers to gender equality.

However, rural villages where men discourage and sometimes shut women out of decision making, this change cannot be expected to happen spontaneously or be trusted to evolve over time. Instead, proactive measures need to be taken that train and place women in positions of political power, while meeting their various needs and sensitizing the entire community about women's rights and gender equality.

The benefits of gender equality in local governments are many: greater cohesion between village gender groups, more diversified input and collaboration in development projects, stronger economic opportunities for all members of society, and the potential for advances in education and health. In short, all of these positive results are components of one single benefit: community development. Thus, while female political participation and leadership improve the welfare of women, they inevitably improve upon the lives of all members of the community.

***-Daniella R. Montemarano***  
*Global Conscience Initiative*  
*December 2011*

---

<sup>13</sup> Mussa, 1-5.