

The North-West Women Empowerment Forum (NOWWEF): an Institutional Strengthening in Women Development in the North-West Region of Cameroon, 2005 – 2015

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ABSTRACT

Before the 1990s, the role of North-West women in the economic activities of the province was very minimal. They were mainly involved in the food production sector, which did not contribute much to the family's cash income. The 1990 laws of freedom of association in Cameroon (Law N0 90/053/19/12/1990) were an impetus for the formation of women's groups, whose activities now form the bedrock of rural livelihoods. Thus, the North-West Women Empowerment Forum (NOWWEF) as a National Women's Forum was created in 2007 with objectives to advance the leadership, cultural, and economic empowerment of women in the North-West Region (NWR). This forum connects women of significant and diverse achievement for the purpose of idea exchange, inspiration, and learning. As an empirical study of the situation of women in the North-West of Cameroon, this paper is particularly focused on the women's struggle to empower themselves and improve their quality of life through engagement and how the government and other development partners are helping to promote this. Thus, it also aims at in-depth descriptions of the activities of NOWWEF, which stands as an umbrella that unites all the women from different areas of the region and also acts as an institutional strengthening for gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Content analysis has been adopted in the collection and processing of data. Our materials embody both primary and secondary data collected from private archives, interviews, books, journals, articles, and academic works.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Institutional Strengthening, NOWWEF, North-West Region.

INTRODUCTION

In seeking to understand why women's role in the process of Community Development (CD) is still limited to basic activities at the household and local community levels, it has become necessary to examine women's roles within the Cameroonian socio-cultural milieu to observe how these are affecting the overall development process. Much of women's work in Cameroon, like that of most developing countries, is not recognised and therefore not computed in national income statistics. Where women's activities are given some form of recognition, they often do not have the opportunity to excel. At the family level, women are rarely consulted on many basic decisions that directly affect their productive and reproductive lives. As time went on, the government took initiative to empower women all over Cameroon to promote their influence in the community in recognition of the pivotal role they play in uplifting living standards and alleviating poverty, particularly in rural communities, which also falls within the government's overall development plan for the nation. Due to this, the Cameroonian government encouraged women to get more involved in the activities of Common Initiative Groups (CIGs) through the enactment of Law No. 92/006 of August 14, 1992. This law liberalised the creation and management of NGO's and CIGs throughout the territory. This encouraged the creation of women's groups like the North West Women's Empowerment Forum (NOWWEF). NOWWEF, as used in this paper, refers to a local organisation outside government direct control that is legal, apolitical, benevolent, and non-profit-making and works for the improvement of the lifestyle of women in one or more domains.

This paper discusses contemporary issues in developing countries within the context of the Cameroon North-West Region. It seeks to understand how government policy and development organisations in Cameroon are empowering women and promoting their role in the CD process. It examines the activities carried out by NOWWEF in order to fight against poverty and foster development through women's empowerment in many domains that include socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects of their lives, as well as seeking to find out to what extent NOWWEF has contributed to moving women from their subordinate and poverty-stricken position in Cameroon to one that can enable them to fully participate in all spheres of national life.

THE ADVENT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE NORTH WEST WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FORUM (NOWWEF)

This section centres on the genesis of NOWWEF, followed by the context of its creation, before shedding light on its mission and objectives.

The Genesis of NOWWEF

The North West Women's Empowerment Forum is a non-governmental, political, and non-profit organisation. This women's group is open to women of all walks of life from all 7 Divisions of the North-West Region of Cameroon. Founded in 2005, her mission is to empower the women of the NWR in all spheres of their economic, political, and social lives in order to improve their standard of living. This forum started as the North West Women Development Association (NOWWODA) on August 12th, 2005, by Ama Tutu Muna. At the time, membership was solely reserved for a limited number of women since all the Divisions were not concerned. But later, it was enlarged and now involves all 7 Divisions of the NWR. This enlargement led to the modification of the designation, which changed from NOWWODA to NOWWEF (North West Women Empowerment Forum) in 2007. [\[1\]](#)

Minister Ama Tutu Muna launched the North West Women's Forum (NOWWEF) at the Bamenda Congress Hall in March 2008. During the launching ceremony, the 14-member executive bureau, headed by Ndoping Beatrice, was also presented. NOWWEF, as its initiators explained, seeks to empower the women of the North West region and carry out certain selected projects at the political, economic, and social levels. During the inauguration speech, the minister of arts and culture reminded members of their role as development agents. She noted that as women, they are also the mothers of the nation, stressing that investing in women is primordial to nation-building. While presenting the association, Mrs. Ndoping said it is the brainchild of the Minister of Culture, who came up with the idea in August 2005. She said NOWWEF is a non-profit organisation that groups women in the province either by their ethnic and geographical origins or by marriage. She equally emphasised on the fact that NOWWEF's mission statement lays focus on its capacity-building orientation for women of the North-West in all spheres of life. Its specific objective is to contribute to the development of the region by focusing resources on the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and the education of girl children. [\[2\]](#)

The context of the creation of NOWWEF

On the occasion of the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in September 1995, government and international organisation delegates from 189 states adopted by consensus the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA), which was subsequently endorsed by the UN General Assembly on 8 December 1995. This was a statement of political commitment by participating governments to advance the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere and to ensure the full implementation of the human rights of women and girls. The BPFA was a culmination of the strong advocacy process and earlier successful steps for recognition of women's rights as human rights in the 1980s and early 1990s by women human rights defenders and women's groups worldwide. [\[3\]](#)

BPFA was aimed at promoting and protecting the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women throughout their life cycle. It remains the most comprehensive governmental agreement to date on what needs to be done to achieve women's empowerment, the full realisation of women's rights, and substantive gender equality. Apart from the BPFA, the country has signed, in addition, other international instruments to advance women's rights and fight discrimination against women, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985), the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993), and the Cairo Declaration on Population and Development (1994).^[4] This served as a milestone in raising international awareness of women's issues and aimed at accelerating the advancement, empowerment, and integration of women in development. This is why, in 2005, the creation of NOWWEF was highly motivated by Cameroonian women due to the opportunity given to them.^[5]

Following the democratic policy that the Cameroonian government finally adopted in the 1990s, the country witnessed the reintroduction of multi-party politics. This was a new era that constituted a critical turn in the process of freedom of association within the nation. Thanks to the law N° 90/053 of 1990, a large opportunity was given to any political, social, or religious group to freely and legally put in place an association. Thanks to this legal framework, the creation of NOWWEF was made possible in 2005. This regional organisation was then created with the mission to empower the women of the North-West Region in all spheres of life. It should be noted that this women's association aims at fostering growth and community development in the area, in part to alleviate poverty and improve living conditions.^[6]

NOWWEF is the main umbrella organisation that embraces all seven divisions of the NWR, with Bamenda as its capital. Apart from the Bamenda branch, NOWWEF also has representation in some areas of the country, including Ngoketungia, Yaounde, and Buea. It should be noted that so far, only 5 divisions in the region have registered as members of the organisation. Up until now, we have had women's groups from the Boyo, Bui, Mezam, Ngoketungia, and Momo divisions join NOWWEF. Membership in NOWWEF requires a payment of 25,000 FCFA in fees for those who register as a women's group. As for individual registration, the payment of 10,000 FCFA in fees is required.^[7]

Talking of institutional strengthening, we must say that NOWWEF is a forum that helps women to become more assertive, discover themselves and their potential, and enable them to assume more leadership roles. The creation of NOWWEF aimed at overpowering stereotypes and bringing women into the limelight to allow them to initiate and not only contribute. This regional female group is essentially composed of women elites and other group representatives who taught that it was time to go further than the usual local development associations previously created and animated by women; they think that it was then time to think big already.^[8] The North-West Women's Empowerment Forum is equally a mechanism to ensure that opinion leaders and policymakers at the highest level are encouraged to work towards the prevention and eradication of violence against women. It is also a forum that "invests in women and girls" and helps intensify action to end all forms of violence against women and girls.^[9]

As we said later, one of the brains behind this ambitious path to progress embraced by the North-West Women is a woman who knows what it takes to be empowered. This refers to Ama Tutu Muna, who used her leadership qualities to break barriers and show her determination in sharing her success story with women from the NWR. The fourteen women elected to manage the forum are led by another woman, Dr. Beatrice Ndoping, who is the director of the Mezam Women Empowerment Centre. This university senior lecturer is familiar with the problems faced by the women of the region. Far from trying to push men aside, these women think that they are giving men a pat on the back, saying "You have worked so hard and deserve to be ably assisted".^[10]

The Mission and objectives of NOWWEF

In her pursuit of empowering women from the region, NOWWEF usually carries out a number of activities that aim at inculcating in the members' the practical path to materialising the concept in their lives. NOWWEF has since carried out a wide variety of educational, humanitarian, capacity-building, and cultural activities addressing issues from national to grass-roots perspectives through conferences, seminars, workshops, projects, and training programmes.[\[11\]](#) However, the execution of these activities depends on a road map implemented by the mission and the objectives previously defined by the leaders of this group. With the mission to empower the women of the NWR in all spheres of life and in order to foster growth and development in the area, NOWWEF has a number of objectives that aim at alleviating poverty and improving the living conditions of women, which are:

1. Empower and support health wellness, prioritising malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS;
2. Promote the education of the girl child, adult literacy programmes, and capacity building;
3. Identify, design, and implement community development projects in all seven divisions of the NWR;
4. Identify opportunities and channels for grass-roots women to access international markets;
5. Empower the women of the North West with proactive leadership skills and promote strategic actions towards political participation and decision-making.[\[12\]](#)

In the light of these objectives, several strategies are put in place to provide women with all they need to ameliorate their status through empowerment.

THE ACTIVITIES OF NOWWEF IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE NORTH-WEST REGION

Within the framework of its actions regarding women's empowerment in the North-West, NOWWEF has carried out a wide range of activities that involve socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects.

Socio-cultural activities

In collaboration with NOWWEF, the umbrella organisation for women's associations in the North-West region of Cameroon, the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) in Yaounde organised an outreach event from March 29-31, 2008, at the Congress Hall in Bamenda. Over 950 people participated in the event, and representatives from more than 26 women's NGOs were in attendance, as were traditional leaders, administrative authorities, and opinion leaders of the region.[\[13\]](#)

The theme of the event was "There Comes a Time ... Now is the Time... Let's Take Action". It provided an opportunity for the UNIC's National Information Officer to share the UN Secretary-General's message on his special campaign to end violence against women. Other speakers included the Secretary General of the North-West Fon's Union, a former Prime Minister and opinion leader, a representative of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, and the Minister of Culture.[\[14\]](#) During the second phase of the event, the UNIC organised a media talk that aimed to emphasise Mr. Ban Ki-moon's campaign to end violence against women, increase awareness of the issue, and encourage actions towards the protection of women's rights.

This session was held on March 31. 26 journalists and broadcasters, who are members of the UN Press Club Bamenda, attended the session. After an introductory speech by the UN Press Club Coordinator, UNIC's National Information Officer highlighted the main points from the UN Secretary-General's campaign launch statement and his message for International Women's Day 2008.[\[15\]](#)

The instructor for the session led a discussion under the theme “violence against women as a human rights concern, strategic communication to end violence against women, and developing messages to fight violence against women”. A veteran journalist talked about how she effected change through her reporting on cultural vices in the northern region of Bali, now a case study for the media’s positive contribution to change and eliminating violence against women. The participants created a network to continue action to end violence against women, which will focus on communication targeted towards traditional rulers in particular and men in general.[\[16\]](#)

A seminar was organised on November 10, 2010 on Information and Sensitization Talk on the Reduction of Maternal and Infant Mortality. Being the main organiser, NOWWEF invited the CARMMA organisation (Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa) to come and inform the women on the realities related to this topic. CARMMA was launched by the African Union as an African commitment on May 7th, 2009, in Addis Ababa to increase activities for the reduction of maternal, neonatal, and infant mortality in Africa. The situation of women’s health during pregnancy and childbirth remains a concern for Africa in general and Cameroon in particular. The prevention of maternal mortality is considered one of the preoccupations of NOWWEF. This aims at assisting her members in order to help meet the targets set in place and contribute to the socio-economic development of the North-West women, given that the woman is not only a career and an educator but also an actor in economy and development.[\[17\]](#)

In fact, during this seminar, some medical doctors working in partnership with the Ministry of Public Health were invited to come and talk to the women of the North-West on this sensitive topic. They started by telling the women the death rate of women during childbirth, which is about 1,000 for every 10,000 women giving birth in the world every day. They call women’s attention to the importance of clinical check-ups during pregnancy. They attributed HIV/AIDS and unsafe abortions as some of the causes of the high death rate. They said that family planning, which was introduced to reduce maternal births, is fast declining. Consequently, all African leaders have taken this health hazard into consideration, and much money is allocated to the budget to cater for the wellbeing of the population.[\[18\]](#)

Also, Dr. Baye Martina gave a health talk on April 22nd, 2009, emphasising the importance of breast milk. This was to make the NOWWEF women aware of the risk of not breastfeeding a child and also to encourage each woman to carry out medical checks (preferably one week after menses) to make sure she is not attacked by any disease, such as breast cancer. Hand-outs were distributed to let the women have more detailed information about the topic.[\[19\]](#)

In all its dimensions, culture is a fundamental component of sustainable development through tangible and intangible heritage and various forms of artistic expression. Culture is a powerful contributor to economic development, social stability, and environmental protection. As a repository of knowledge, meanings, and values that permeate all aspects of our lives, culture equally defines the way human beings live and interact, both at local and global scales.[\[20\]](#)

Again, seen from this angle, culture appears as an important factor that determines the belonging sentiment of the NOWWEF members. This can be noticed through the various cultural shows organised by this female group. For example, a cultural show took place on May 31st, 2010 at the Yaounde sports complex. At that event, women were called to prepare for dramas that they presented to the guests. The various dance groups of the NWR usually give their dance practise calendars to the cultural officers to prepare for the event. During this cultural demonstration, emphasis was put on these dances to portray the culture back home. For the occasion, these women had to go back home and bring out the real cultural aspects and regalia to display on this day. The evening of the cultural show was aimed to be well spiced by the drama and fashion parade. In preparation for the event, each division was given instructions on how they should parade the traditional clothing for the various divisions of the NWR.

These divisions had selected the various groups as the best for the parade. These groups were as follows:

- Mezam: Bafut and Mankon;
- Donga-Mantung: Ndu and Nwa;
- Momo: Mbengwi and Aghem;
- Bui: Banso and Noni;
- Ngoketungia: Bamunka and Bamungo;
- Boyo: Komand Bum;

Ultimately, prizes were awarded to the best of the first three dance groups in order to encourage them to endeavour to preserve and promote the culture of the region. The fashion parade aimed at spicing up the occasion and bringing out various criteria, among which we can name the following:

- How women used to dress in the 1950s
- How women dress in this millennium.[\[21\]](#)

One of the main activities of NOWWEF is participation in International Women's Day, which takes place on the 8th of March each year. On this occasion, women from various spheres of life gather to commemorate the event. For this reason, NOWWEF women usually converge on the May 20th Boulevard ceremonial grounds to celebrate International Women's Day under the watchful eyes of top personalities in the country. The March Pass is usually performed by thousands of women representing several public and private institutions, companies, and professional and socio-cultural groups like NOWWEF. The event is usually an opportunity for these women to exhibit their capacities and talents and promote their empowerment within all sectors of society. During this official demonstration, emphasis is often placed on the way people dress to display and promote their cultural identity. This association used her marching styles, colourful uniform, and messages to draw people's attention and attract rounds of applause from the dignitaries seated in the grandstands.[\[22\]](#)

As later said, NOWWEF aims at promoting the North-West Women (NWW) in all domains of life by working for their fulfilment and that of their various communities. According to the members of this association, women's day should be celebrated every day of the year and not only on the 8th of March. They wish to banish the idea that makes people think that the celebration is all about marching and wearing rappers. They believe that beyond the activities related to the March 8 celebration, women should instead look at and think about the message behind the celebration of that day in order to change people's behaviour and move forward on a daily basis. NOWWEF equally aims at sensitising the population, especially men, which they consider as their partners in the process of gender equality. The forum also aims at educating women and making them aware of the fact that they have the same potential as men in everything and that the difference of sexes symbolises neither a privilege nor a disadvantage for anybody. But this is just the will of God, who wanted the two sexes to work together for the progress of each and every one.[\[23\]](#)

To take part in this event, the NOWWEF women usually go through a series of preparatory meetings. This helps them meticulously contribute to the success of a march-past. For instance, in the preparatory meeting held for the 2010 edition, it was announced that all the women would have a grand evening with Mafor. To this effect, badges were given to almost all the groups to be used as laissez-passer. Modalities were equally given to women on how the march pass on the 8th march was going to look like. All these precautions are usually taken to avoid any collective or individual confusion or embarrassment during the official parade.

- No handbag during marching;
- No head scarf during marching;
- All women shall wear the traditional cap;
- All women should wear black shoes.[\[24\]](#)

Some advice and modalities were given in order to help these women have self-discipline and better prepare for the event. The emphasis was laid on those who would march with the traditional attire to get ready, on those who would portray the cultural icon of the North-West Region, and on the flag bearers. At the end of the meeting, gifts from the 8th of March totalling 200 pieces were offered by the Minister of Arts and Culture to be shared among participating women. These wrappers were official uniforms chosen to that effect. Pictures 1 and 2 aim at illustrating further the official parade usually demonstrated by NOWWEF women at the Yaounde 20th, May Boulevard. [25]

Picture 1: NOWWEF Women's day parade in official uniform at the Yaounde 20th May Boulevard on the May 20th, 2013



Source : Author's collection, March 8th 2013

The women were marching for the 2013 edition of the international women's day at the Yaounde 20th May Boulevard. They were each wearing the official uniform chosen to that effect.

Picture 2: NOWWEF Women's day parade in traditional uniform at the Yaounde 20th May Boulevard on the May 20th, 2010



Source : Author's collection, May 27th 2013

On the Yaounde 20th May Boulevard, NOWWEF women paraded on the occasion of the International Women's Day, in a spring of exhibition of their cultural belonging through their traditional uniform.

On the February 25th, 2015, Ama Tutu Muna invited the members of NOWWEF for their yearly rendezvous in preparation of the International Day for Women at the Hotel De Ville Yaounde. Women and girls wanted to be part of her free-will donation of the fabric of the 2015 International Day of the Woman, and they came in their great numbers, which is more than a thousand. Following her welcome speech, she urged the women to turn out massively for the peace work and for the match pass celebration on March 8th, the International Day of the Woman. She encouraged the women to dream big and be hard workers, saying, "You can't achieve big things if you do not dream big, and this can only be possible if you remain positive and are free from all forms of hate". As North-West women from different cultural backgrounds lived together in the different regions, she created an environment where women could progress through the exchange of ideas and live in harmony. Hard work and efficiency have continued to be the qualities that define her. She has and is still supporting the efforts of women and girls in several domains. Her role as a mentor has re-ignited hope in the poor women who have become agents of change in their homes and communities, as she is the dream of every woman [26].

Concerning health-related issues, NOWWEF held conferences, seminars, and workshops, during which they brought in experts to educate women. Talks were organised in the domains of cancer, malaria, and sexuality. Thus, women acquired knowledge on how to prevent these diseases and care for those already infected. For example, a health talk was given in 2009 by Dr. Baye Martina with other members of the team about cancer of the cervix.

They explained to the women what the disease is all about before unveiling to them the risks found if the disease is discovered in a person. They finally disclosed the causes of the disease before explaining the symptoms. [27]

Moreover, in 2010, Dr. Baye Martina and her team of experts equally carried out an educational talk on cholera. Women were advised on how to handle a cholera patient and how to apply some hygienic measures to avoid the disease. This action appeared as a proper strategy that seriously fostered the fight against this killing disease within the Cameroonian territory. It should also be noted that NOWWEF co-organised an international seminar on natural plants with ANAMED (Actions for Natural Medicine). ANAMED is a Christian association whose objective is to fight against illness and bring new strength and stability to families through the cultivation and consumption of medicinal plants in the tropics. This seminar took place at the Institute Polyvalent Nichol (IPONI) in Yaounde from July 19 to 20, 2009. NOWWEF women were led to understand that they have a challenge, which is to rescue their society from health hazards and, as such, must protect their environment. Women were then advised to keep their environment clean and stop the careless dumping of waste, which creates a lot of health hazards. [28] Pictures 3 and 4 sustain the above analyses.

Picture 3: Women being lectured on medicinal plants



Source: Beatrice Koufo, 24/07/2013.
Participants of the seminar held from July 19–20, 2009 were lectured on the virtues of medicinal plants.

Picture 4: Certificates awarded to the Seminarists



Source: Veronica Ajeagah, 21/09/2013.
This training on medicinal plants was crowned at the end with the awarding of certificates to each participant.

During this seminar, women were also taught to know and distinguish the various plants in the environment and to identify people with different infections. They were equally trained on how to produce drugs from natural plants like Moringa, and were advised to work with modern medicine. At the end of this training, participants were awarded certificates. All these activities were motivated by the fact that one of the main goals of NOWWEF is to promote physical fitness among women and fight malaria, HIV/AIDS, and cancer in a bid to create awareness on environmental issues that would improve the status of women and children. [29]

Another health talk was given by Mrs. Wango to the NOWWEF women on cancer of the uterus. She explained all possible signs that can help identify the illness, and if they notice any abnormalities, they should consult a doctor immediately. She concluded her talk with the sharing of the female condom and explained the importance of it to women before teaching them how to make good use of it.

Economic activities

The objective of NOWWEF is not only to fight for the empowerment and autonomy of the NWW and the improvement of their political, social, and economic status but also to provide a means to an end. This is aimed at improving the living standards of women by alleviating poverty. Thus, women are sensitised to the need to be self-reliant and economically viable so as to work in partnership with their families. On July 14th, 2010, the president of an international organisation, FRULAC (Fruits and Vegetables in Cameroon), visited the NOWWEF women in Yaounde. FRULAC is a company that clears waste and deals with fruits and vegetable stuff, which they dry and process. For that visit, 150 women registered with 3,000 FCFA each. [30] This meeting was aimed at helping women, especially those who are farmers, be able to preserve their farm

products, especially those that get spoiled very quickly. Another perspective on this was to enable women to enter international markets where these transformed products could be sold to the outside world in all the seasons. The training is equally aimed at teaching the participants how to become more productive by obtaining double gain through the farm products and be able to generate more income.[\[31\]](#)

Political activities

NOWWEF organised a conference on April 21st, 2007 at the Bamenda Congress Hall under the theme “empowering women politically”. The primary reasons for this meeting were presented as follows:

- Raise awareness on the importance of women’s numerical strength within the evolution of society;
- Encourage and install interest in women to be more involved in politics through the testimonies of politically active women;
- Identify female political aspirants and seek ways of encouraging and supporting their efforts, and thereafter equipping them with necessary tools for an efficient action in the field.

The organisation of the conference was due to the fact that women are recognised as agents of change and a force with which to be reckoned. But the reality shows that Cameroonian women have low participation in leadership politics and in elective posts. Thus, seeking ways to resolve this, NOWWEF, co-financed by the United States Embassy and UNIFEM, organised this conference to empower NWW politically. About 350 women took part in the event, including some important personalities like Ama Tutu Muna, the representative of the Governor of the NWR.[\[32\]](#) During this conference, speeches were given by some dignitaries to encourage the NWW to enter political life. For instance, the speech made by Dr. Uphie Chinje Melo, who said: “It is widely recognised that women are agents of change and always first to cross the divide line”.

In this light, the NWW were made to understand that the first step is to recognise their personal power, decide to use it, and make choices about their own future. They were taught not to be afraid of the word politics and equally to be encouraged to work together for collective power, which is a strength that will help them agree on the goals to attain. Women were then exhorted to be very connected and constitute a network to empower each other. Otherwise, these female folk should use their numerical superiority during moments of voting and choose their counterparts in many posts of responsibility rather than campaigning against their fellow women. Women already in positions of power or responsibility were also called to encourage fellow women out there by being welcoming and making themselves available. The women were told that despite the challenges that they are facing, it is important to create a very strong awareness that will enable them to participate in leadership positions in public life.[\[33\]](#)

This means that the women of the North West must get together and share their knowledge, allow opportunities for other women, and so on. So, they were called to work very hard, develop themselves, and go out of themselves and beyond themselves for the good of their families and Cameroon. It is for this reason that NOWWEF is struggling to obtain greater improvement for women in a region where the local community is having a hard time nurturing themselves and their families because of economic hardship. Hence, NOWWEF is called to associate with other organs of the region to prepare women who can be in positions of leadership and forwarded to the government. This would help promote women’s involvement in decision-making.[\[34\]](#)

ACHIEVEMENTS OF NOWWEF IN WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT IN THE NORTH-WEST REGION

As one of the associations fighting for the welfare of women in the NWR, NOWWEF usually carried out some political, economic, and socio-cultural achievements within the area when it was necessary, as discussed in this section of the paper.

Politically, one of the most important achievements was the assistance granted to the victims of the 2012 floods in Babessi in Ngoketungia Division and Widikum in Momo Division, who benefited from the generosity demonstrated by NOWWEF. In effect, the forum's women were in Babessi and Widikum to stand by the flood victims in their hour of suffering following the floods of September 9th, 2012, and October 6th, 2012, respectively, which destroyed their farms, houses, and properties. The women travelled to Babessi and Widikum to offer tonnes of maize, 100 bags of rice, 120 litres of palm oil, bags of salt, bars of soap, clothes for women and their children, books, school bags, pens, and buckets, among others. The President of NOWWEF, Dr. Beatrice Ndoping, and the Yaounde Quarter President, Mrs. Isabelle Zama, encouraged the flood victims to meet the challenge with courage and faith. They were inspired to accept their situation and forge ahead as spirited men, women, and children. The gifts, according to Dr. Ndoping, were the result of the generous efforts of illustrious daughters of the North-West Region who are members of NOWWEF. Among the lot were the PM's wife, Dr. Linda Yang, and Mafor Ama Tutu Muna, Minister of Arts and Culture, who doubles as the Coordinator of NOWWEF. In all, the gifts worth about FCFA 2.5 million rekindled hope in the flood victims, most of whom were rendered homeless by the natural disaster. On hand to receive the gifts and distribute them to beneficiary victims were the Sub-divisional Officers of Babessi, Ali Anogu, and of Widikum, Aneuren Mbuge, who expressed their commitment to ensuring that the gifts serve only victims. It should be noted that the heavy rains that were rocking the nation did not spare the NWR, which continued to count the casualties in Babessi and Widikum. The floods of September 9th, 2012, destroyed farms and some 59 houses, causing 95 people from 26 families to become homeless in Babessi. Elsewhere, Diche I, one of the four villages of Widikum, was on October 6th, 2012, covered by floods that destroyed some houses and did not help matters for pupils and students whose school books and other materials were either soaked or carried away by the floods.[\[35\]](#)

Still in the corridor of humanitarian actions, NOWWEF women demonstrated in 2010 their determination to bring solutions not only to societal problems but equally to environmental issues. In fact, the organisation executed a tree planting programme in two water catchment areas in Mendankwe, supplying Our Lady of Lords secondary school and the Sabga community in Tubah subdivision, both in Mezam Division. These women carried out mass media sensitization on the importance of trees and planted over 2,500 water-friendly trees that were to help the areas conserve water during the dry season. This humanitarian gesture also went along with the strong intention of these women to contribute to sustainable development within the region. In the same chapter of environmental issues, NOWWEF women had the opportunity to welcome the President of the National Assembly, Honourable Cavaye Yeguié Djibril, on the occasion of the launch of the tree planting project in Nkambe, Kumbo, and Batibo in the North West Region. The presence of these women on the battle front more than testified to their strong commitment to endeavour for the development of the region.[\[36\]](#)

Among the various activities done, NOWWEF women equally had the privilege to welcome Mrs. Marie Thérèse Abena, the Minister of Women's Empowerment and the Family, on the occasion of the launch of the 2012 World Rural Women's Day in Bamenda. This event gave an opportunity to these women to demonstrate anew to the government their firm determination to amplify the process of their empowerment and work to alleviate poverty within their different communities in the NWR. NOWWEF women welcomed the Minister of Planning and Regional Development during the launch of the North West Development Programme in Mbengwi, Momo Division. This organisation went to stand with the minister in order to appear as active actors in that programme. More importantly, women used this opportunity to gain more ground in the development process of their communities.[\[37\]](#)

Economically, NOWWEF members have benefited from training workshops and seminars on various topics, including gardening and mushroom production, pepper bead production and jewellery assembly, safety measures for NWR traditional meal preparation, project writing, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS.[\[38\]](#) A capacity-building workshop on Information Communication Technology

(ICT) was organised by NOWWEF, and 30 women from the 7 divisions of the NWR were offered scholarships to follow a computer training in order to acquire knowledge on the use of programmes like Word, Excel, and the internet. The training took place at the African Institute of Computer Sciences in Yaounde for three months in 2010. At the end of this course, women received attestations from the hands of Mr. Essimi Menye, the Minister of Finance, and in the presence of some dignitaries. The aim of NOWWEF behind this training was to work for the advancement of women at all levels and across all business areas and to encourage them to enter non-traditional job fields. This training programme, especially in Information Technology was equally carried out to improve the literacy of the NWW. This was due to the fact that knowledge of ICT has become an imperative tool for global development. In a similar chapter, NOWWEF welcomed Mr. Jean Pierre Biyiti Bi Essam, the Minister of Post and Telecommunication in 2013. He was launching a computer training centre at Ewoh in Batibo in order to provide a way for the education of women and girls on ICT. On this occasion, a delegation of about 18 people took part in the event and expressed their gratitude to the government, which by taking this action was giving them a helping hand in the development of their region.[\[39\]](#)

Socio-culturally, the Cameroon Association of University Women (CAMAUW), in collaboration with NOWWEF, challenged the North West female students in particular and schooling women in general to always strive to be counted among the best in their various academic disciplines. CAMAUW is a non-profit, non-political NGO working locally, nationally, and globally and is affiliated with the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and a membership of over 180,000 female graduates from 72 national federations and associations, according to CAMAUW's president said.[\[40\]](#)

In the same manner, Dr. Beatrice Ndoping, president of CAMAUW, who presented the challenge to women on February 1st, 2008, in Buea, Cameroon, was presiding at an award-giving ceremony organised to honour two female graduates who recently distinguished themselves in education at the University of Buea, one of Cameroon's six state-owned universities. According to Dr. Ndoping, one of the major weapons for the social integration of women remains education. She stressed that the more women get formally educated, the greater their chances are to occupy decision-making positions in society. In fact, during the award-giving ceremony, she equally declared that through education, "women and girls are empowered to be agents for change, building sustainable futures". The CAMAUW award-winning females were a bachelor's degree holder and a terminal degree (PhD) holder, Tume Jane-Francis Yensii and Irene A. Anyangwe, respectively. This was a stimulative gesture that aimed at helping women understand the importance of education and exciting them to further their studies with much determination, as seen in picture 5.[\[41\]](#)

Picture 5:
Leading team of CAMAUW award



Source: Christopher Ambe Shu, 01/06/2013.

A family picture was taken after the award-giving ceremony on February 1st, 2008, in Buea. Left to right: Dr. Beatrice Ndoping, Mrs. Thierry Mobega, Mr. Jane-francis Yensii, Dr. Irene Anyangwe, and Dr. Niger Thomas Margaret in a family photo during the event.

CAMAUIW, in collaboration with NOWWEEF, had given awards to girls who excelled at the secondary school level in order to encourage them to enrol, continue their studies, and graduate from secondary school with flying colours. They have equally carried out a wide range of educational and humanitarian activities addressing issues from a national and grassroots perspective through seminars, workshops, conferences, research projects, and training programmes. According to Dr. Ndoping, CAMAUIW works in collaboration with NOWWEEF. This international NGO has a mission that is made up of a wide range of components. These include the following aspects: advocacy for the improvement of the status of women and girls; promoting long-life education; and enabling graduate women to use their expertise to affect change.[\[42\]](#)

PROBLEMS FACED BY NOWWEEF

NOWWEEF equally faces a series of problems as it fights and works for the empowerment of women in the North-West Region. These problems vary from socio-cultural to economic to political, as discussed in this section of the paper.

Socio-culturally, the coexistence of customary laws and national legislation in almost all regions of Cameroon, including the North-West Region, whereby customary laws tend to supersede national legislation, is a great hindrance to the success of NOWWEEF. These customary laws have continued to exclude women from land ownership, inheritance rights, and the right to a basic education in favour of early and sometimes forced marriages. The International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP) (2006) observed that despite a Supreme Court decision recognising women's rights to be granted land and the existence of the Cameroon Law of Succession, discriminatory customary inheritance laws still dominate. The customary laws prevent female children from inheriting real estate from their parents on the grounds that the female child normally leaves the family to join the husband's family. In most areas of Cameroon, the woman is seen as the property of some other person (the man), who will collect her by marriage.

Economically, it has been found that there are still many customs in the North-West that prevent women from obtaining credits or loans or engaging in any business to improve their lives without the husband's consent. Moreover, conditions for credits and loans always require collateral, such as land and houses, which most women cannot afford. This adds to their economic marginalisation as they cannot exercise their full economic rights. The Civil Status Registration Ordinance (N0 81-02 of June 1998):Article 74 (1) states that a 'married woman may exercise a trade different from that of her husband, but Article 74 (2), however, adds that "the husband may object to the exercise of such a trade in the interest of the marriage or their children". This virtually gives the husband absolute authority to decide what the wife can do, including joining a group or association like NOWWEEF and undertaking any business activity or venture that she may wish to undertake to improve her life and that of the family. Instances of women being refused by their husbands from carrying out any form of business or income-generating activity to improve their lives are very common throughout the study region, as are cases of husbands not wanting their wives to improve their education for fear that they may come to challenge their authority at home. Group affiliation (NOWWEEF), which has become a source of power and empowerment for many rural women, is still a privilege that many rural women are yet to start enjoying.

Politically, the absence of most NOWWEEF women in positions of major decision-making that affect their own lives has been found to be a major constituent element of their inability to benefit fully from government programmes and those of other development partners to advance their status. This has been supported by numerous other research studies and findings in Cameroon. In Cameroon, women make up more than 50% of the population but do not usually have a say in major decision-making that is taken, not only in the households but also at the national level: decisions that affect their own lives and their relations with men.[\[43\]](#) In the structural context, Cameroonian women rarely attain management positions in most institutions. The female perspective is almost absent in the design and implementation of products and services, a problem whose root causes can be traced back to training, cultural barriers, and traditional belief systems.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the origin, the purpose, and the activities of NOWWEF. Throughout this section, it has appeared that NOWWEF was created in 2005 after the female elites of the region discovered the need to put in place an umbrella organisation that can better coordinate the process of women's empowerment within the region. This part has equally explored the functioning of this forum before shedding light on its activities. On the other hand, it has appeared that NOWWEF, through its actions, constitutes a permanent support that stands with women in their process of self-reliance. This is proved by a number of substantial activities carried out in order to educate women on how to ameliorate their living standards and become empowered. Finally, it has appeared that NOWWEF members have organised educational seminars, training workshops, and media activities that have projected and promoted the empowerment of North-West women. These seminars and conferences have equipped a number of women from the region with the skills needed in the process of their self-reliance. In Cameroon and the North-West region in particular, women's empowerment has become a buzzword within development organisations and women's groups and is gradually beginning to find its place on the political agenda and in the public and private media. Even though there is a whole cabinet ministry devoted to this, it is arguably not a major political or social issue at the moment. Only when women's empowerment becomes an issue of high debate on the socio-political agenda of the country will there be a shakedown that brings about the expected change.

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FOOT NOTES

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