

PATRIARCHAL RESISTANCE IN AN ERA OF GENDER UPSPRING IN AFRICAN SPORTS: THE CASE OF CAMEROON WHERE THE LIONESSES ARE BETTER MEDALS HUNTERS THAN THE LIONS 1954-2017

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Abstract: *In recent years, sports have been the most rapid social phenomena in the world and Africa has not been side-lined. But as it is the case with many other disciplines, it has turned to a male practise, (controlled and managed). In many African nations, female breakthrough in sports based on performance has not really changed societal perception vis-à-vis female participation in sport. In Cameroon, societal considerations based on tradition and culture has greatly undermined female breakthrough and performances in sports. This paper argues that notwithstanding the arsenal of international and national convention in-which Cameroon has entangled itself, the integration and recognition of female participation in sports is still minimal. Paradoxically the lionesses have many a time enabled Cameroonians to listen to the national anthem and see their beloved green-red-yellow flag fly very high. Based on historical and qualitative data the paper demonstrates that limited attention was given and is still given to female performances in Cameroon. The paper (analyses) considers the administrative, the urbanisation, the socio-economic and the cultural factors to understand the present trend of Cameroon female sports.*

Keywords: Patriarchal, Gender, Sports, Social Perception, Athletes, Federation.

1. Introduction

In every human society there exist a certain division of based on sex, age, with activities that are devoted to each strata. In many societies in Africa and around the world, gender issues are curial questions that mobilize general attention of political leaders, social actions, educationists and researchers. This attention is also visible and can be well viewed in the domain of sports, where there is a difference in treatment of male and female athletes. In Cameroon particularly sports has portrayed the highly patriarchal nature of the society- from refusal to accept the female engagement in sport to the undermining of their performances.

Sport is a social representation of historical, social and cultural forces, and at the same time it affirms, legitimates and reproduces those very same conditions. In other words, sports reproduce social reality and transmits those aspects of culture that convey meaning about the social, political and economic order of society; about gender, race and class relation; about the body and physical activities(Strool 2002:130).

In Cameroon there has always been a white stone female presence and participation in sport; be it, in school level or high level competitions. Unfortunately in most cases, female preparation, participation and performances in local or international competitions have suffered comparison to male performances. This negative marginalisation in the words of Slattery (2012:16) kills female sport potential as: 'inequality in sport may be the major stumbling block to why women still do not reach their full potential in sport and are not empowered enough to take up their rightful place in sport.'

Most of the available studies have always focused on male sports, with special fixation on football and migration. In the last three years Cameroon has played host to major female sporting competitions African female volleyball Olympic qualifiers 2015, Female AfroBasket coupled to 2016 Rio Games qualifiers 2016 and female AFCON 2016 (African Football Cup of Nations). These competitions coupled with the two Olympic Games gold medal (2004 Athens

and 2008 Beijing) of Francoise Mbango and the gold medal won by Fegue Marie at the Commonwealth Games (Glasgow 2014) had a great impact on social regard not only on female participation in sports but most importantly the value attributed to their performances. This was particularly true owing to the fact that the lions had not been able to come home with any trophy; one could say it was just like looking for a shadow in dark. Notwithstanding these first class performances on the part of the lions, little has been done in themes of research on female sport. In the same line of thought very few have investigated why female performances are under-regarded and marginalized in Cameroon.

In a purely patriarchal constituted society like Cameroon, norms are neither easily contested nor trespassed. To understand why men owners of public space (champions), refuse to share this space with the 'weaker sex', we shall use social gender theories. We shall evoke the social gender theory of Harding cited by I. Courcy et al (2011 :5) according to which three major processes contribute social construction of gender: 1) gender symbolism; 2) structuring of certain social activities based on gender (gender structure); et 3) individual construction of gender identity (individual gender). We shall use in this research two of the cited theories: gender symbolism and gender structure to understand the male rejection of female performances. This article will study some of the reasons for patriarchal resistance to the emergence of female sport and performance in Cameroon. It will start by presenting the place of women in the Cameroonian society as viewed by other researchers in the field of gender studies; then it proceed to view institutional instruments (national and international) that acted as catalyser to female emergence in the Cameroon sport arena. It will go on to demonstrate that female performances have not received the required attention and valorisation it deserves due to the patriarchal nature of the Cameroonian society.

This article will argue that this marginalisation is partly due to the poor treatment of female sport and particularly performances by media and also the relative slowness in applying institutional measures as concerns gender issues. Finally it will evaluate the merits of studying gender breakthrough in sports and inform decision makers on the importance of promoting gender equality in sport as a means of consolidating social development through women empowerment and as an instrument of our foreign diplomacy.

2. The constraints of being a woman in Cameroon

When you are born a woman in Cameroon, you're already tied to a handful of stereotyped obligations as to your status in the society. We shall go on to see that the place of the woman was at home Sama Yeba (2002:2) as wanted by certain custodians of our traditions and religion. This section will deal with societal constraints in certain regions of Cameroon.

2.1. Societal constraints imposed on girls and women

In Cameroon, the socialisation process was/is different for girls and boys and varies depending on the environment. In some villages of the East, Adamawa, North, Far North, West, Centre, Regions of Cameroon female school attendance is very low as a result of traditional and religion constraints.

The South-West and the North-West Regions are the only regions in Cameroon with schools of higher female enrolment than male (RNEPS2014:19). In reality due to institutional efforts, this tendency is fast declining. In the case where they are allowed to go to school, the leisure activities were and are not the same as for boys.

The society has set rules within the society, in homes etc...the role of the woman is first and foremost to procreate, she represents the affective sex with maternal qualities, "the Angel of the house", subtle and fragile. She is in charge of all house chores and the upbringing of the children both morally and academically. This early definition of the responsibilities of a girl child goes a long way to influence the duration, the qualification, the training as well as the choice of job of the woman she will become. The man represents ferocity, strength, decision making etc...in one word he is the "head". (Ella: 1985:16)

Basically these were the constraints and stereotypes of society on the activities of her members. Even the socialisation process triggered by urbanisation and education has just partially tried to inverse the course of social behaviours and norms as concerns gender issues. If women are confined to household duties, how will they encourage their daughters to get involved in sporting activities which they never experimented as youngsters? Can it be possible for them to stay passive to the choice of their daughters to run around in shorts while their mates are performing 'normal' female duties at home? Are parents in urban areas ready to buy sports equipment for their daughters or wives? These questions are just the reflection of our regard on whom and what a girl/woman is supposed to be and do. In a nutshell they are to perform the daughter-sister-wife-mother duties expected from them.

2.2. The perception of sporting activities for the female sex

The practice of physical education and sport is a fundamental right for all' IYSPE (2005:16). Unfortunately this is not always the case in our society. In certain situations women are so involved in striving for the wellbeing of their families so much so that they hardly have time for leisure. Ntamag Lucien (2017) after investigating had this to say about the situation of the Cameroonian women. Information from international organizations reveal that that 79% of women are involved in informal jobs in Cameroon (call boxers, hairdressers, vendors of all types) and are greatly involved in household care activities and the education of children (Ntamag 2017:4)

With this hand full of duties to accomplish, participation in sport although a fundamental right and an instrument of indiscrimination becomes inefficient because of daily live battles for survival. The girls are always the ones to accompany their mothers in such activities, while the boys will have the opportunity to involve in game playing. For many Cameroonians particularly for the traditional purist, it is an abomination for women to expose their bodies in public. In the Northern region where the majority of families are Muslims it was not even acceptable for girls to sit around boys apart from school not to talk of playing together, with their legs, laps and hair exposed and wearing shorts Dongmo A,S (2017). Sport was regarded as/a practice that emasculated women emasculating women and reduced their chances of child bearing and/turned them to stud boys who could not become good wives (Ella, 1985; Eleme Asse, 2017) We can also add to these constraints the stigmatization of female sporters as being cheap sexual prey for men and unproductive to the family, with some accusing them of lesbianism (Dongmo, 2017; Oloko, 2017). It is worth noting that there has been a lot of progress in the battle leading to the involvement of women in sport. The most difficult is for their performances to be accepted and magnified by men. A number of events backed by (inter)national legislative dispositions has ease the emergence of women in the masculine world of virility expression.

3. Fighting with legal instruments in hand

The administration took a number of measures to implicate the majority of youth in sport as part of the socialisation mission of the school. In Cameroon sports and physical education is an obligatory subject in the academic curricular. The Comite d' instruction physique du territoire was created in Cameroon under French administration as far back as 1925 to organise and implement the practise of physical education and sport in the territory. The Cameroonian government prepared an administrative and legal frame for the integration of girls/women in sport. They also adhered to international conventions in the domain

3.1. The legal and administrative texts for the rise of the Lionesses in Cameroon

This decree just as subsequent ones made no restriction on girls/women participation in sports. The fortunate girls from 'rich families' who went to private schools, had their first sport and physical education lesson in 1945, but for those in public schools it was only in 1952 with the graduation of the first batch of the National Centre for sport and physical education (CNSEP)

of Dschang that they had the opportunity. Amongst the graduates of 1952 was a woman named Ebolo Alvine (Ella 1985). So in French Cameroon all pupils enrolled in school indiscriminately were to have sports lessons. In addition to curricular lessons all pupils were to take part in sport competitions of their choices depending on their capacities. Women had a bicycle cycling team in Yaounde in 1950; others took part in the school, college and university games called (OSSUC) example of Tsanga, Zanga Dephine, Abaze, Ntyan Ndongo, Manyonga who at the time had to compete with boys. Officially there has never been any restriction on female participation in sport activities. Restrictions noted here are the fruits of family and religious considerations.

At independence, the young state declared its desire to promote gender equality in sport through the July 1962 decree instituting a Sports Charter in Cameroon which encouraged all citizens to participate in sport activities for its many values. The recruitment of students into the National Institute of Youth and Sports and the National Centre of Youth and Sport has never been restrictive as concerns gender. Cameroon being a member of the UN adopted all the instruments put in place by this organisation and other agencies in favour of gender promotion and equality amongst citizens. In 1970 was created a ministry of youth and sports for the promotion and protection of all strata of sport practice in the country Ndongo Minsoko (2005:225).

3.2. Participation of female athletes in national and international competitions

The creation and functioning of National Teams in Cameroon is an evidence of this willingness of the state to protect gender equality and wellbeing. The female 4x100m came bronze medallist at the first edition of the All African Games in Brazzaville in 1965 (Ndongo, 2005; Ella, 1985). The only female national team which had never existed was the National Female Football Team, whose first international tournament was the African female football tournament in 1991; which is today called Female AFCON.

The promotion of elite sport alongside physical education and sports lessons, school competitions and specific female sporting events such as the activities marking the celebration of the international day of the woman affirms the Cameroonian governments' policy of inclusive gender protection. It will be long and boring to cite all the official documents which encourage and promote sport in Cameroon for all citizens irrespective of gender, age, religion, tribal or professional considerations. The major ones are: the sports and physical education charter of 1996; the 2011 national sports law (minsep.cmr.gov: 2017). We can agree at this point that the introduction of sport at all educational levels served as a social catalyst for the greater involvement of girls into sport competition and their gateway into elite sport competition. The successes of the pioneer female sporters sparked up admiration from other ladies and served as role models for the younger generations. Despite this codification and protection of female participation in sport, societal regards has only slightly evolved as many still have negative remarks about female performances. We can conclude with this quote which goes thus: 'The fight undertaken by Cameroonian women since independence for the complete legitimization of sports seem to be fruitful to an extent: 'political recognition of female sport through officialization and legitimization, though even at this level, disparities associated with gender remain salient' (Ntamag 2017:2)

The decision by Cameroonian authorities to create and manage female national team in all the sport played in the territory was a great step forward that gradually changed the perception and consideration for women involvement in sport.

4. The masculine reaction to the outstanding performances of the Lionesses

In a purely patriarchal constituted society like Cameroon, norms are neither easily contested nor overcome. To understand male resistance to accepting female performances, it will be judicious we use the social gender theory of Harding cite by Courcy et al (2011 :5) according to which three major processes contribute social construction of gender: 1) gender symbolism; 2) structuring of certain social activities based on gender (gender structure). We

shall use this theory which will be completed by MacDonald (2014: 97), 4 rule hegemonic masculinity character traits which says:

Hegemonic masculinity the atop sits hierarchy of masculinity types refers to a normalizing ideology of gender relations involving the production, negotiation, and reproduction of male domination over women in which he proposes four rules that men are expected to follow. The first rule, 'No Sissy Stuff,' calls for the rejection of all that is feminine; this includes traits such as openness and vulnerability. The second rule, 'The Big Wheel,' requires striving endlessly for fame, success, and social status by all means. The third, 'The Sturdy Oak,' encourages independence, confidence, strength, and toughness. The fourth and final rule, 'Give 'Em Hell,' denotes violence, aggression, bravado, and a willingness to defy authority (MacDonald 2014:97)

These behavioral traits were not expected from women who were considered fragile and it was abnormal for the virile to magnify the fragile. In Cameroon these negation took many forms. Every society establishes norms on how gender issues are to be handled. Some of the norms are no written but are codified by social day to day activities starting from childhood. Unfortunately as the children grow up this perception is reinforced.

4.1. The outstanding performances of the Lionesses of Cameroon and the under-grading rewards their receive

Cameroon is a nation of sport lover. When it comes to sport, all Cameroon sport their national team. Unfortunately when it comes to giving honor and respect for outstanding performances by female athletes and teams there is a breakdown. This is what will be examined in this section. Before bringing the different aspects of rejection we shall show some of the outstanding female performances at international competitions between 2000 and 2017. We shall take the results of the Summer Olympic Games 2000-2016, the Commonwealth Games 2006-2014.

Table 1: Comparative results of Cameroonian male/female athletes at the Olympic Games between 2000 and 2016

Sex	male	Female
Medal	1Gold (2000 Sydney)	2 Gold (2004 Athens-2008 Beijing)

Sources: compiled by Koizah Karh based on field data

During the 2000 games held in the Australian city of Sydney, Cameroon recorded her first ever Olympic Games Gold medal obtained by the male football team. In the next edition a woman called Francoise Mbango won a Gold medal in the Triple Jump event during the 2004 and 2008 games.

Table 2: Comparative results of Cameroonian male/female athletes at the Commonwealth Games between 2006 and 2014.

Medal – Sex	Male	Female	Total
Gold	0	1	1
Silver	1+2=3	1+3=4	7
Bronze	1+2=3	1+2+3=6	9
Total	6	11	17

Sources: compiled by Koizah Karh based on field data

For just but these two international competitions, it is striking to see that the real hunters are the lionesses who make sure they carry home a *prey medal*. As concern the unique case of the Commonwealth Games, the lionesses succeed in satisfying the appetite for medals during every edition. Gold which is the supreme medal and most difficult to predate (Mbango 2017)', has been caught twice at the Olympic Games and once at the Commonwealth Games by the lionesses. The lions have never had gold at the Commonwealth Games. During this period only once has a lioness been Flag Bearer for Cameroon at the Olympic Games. This is rather very

frustrating; the attribution of the Flag Bearer is based on virility, bravery and a potential medalist regrets (Dongmo 2015) generally for male athletes. Femininity to them does not represent this value which is male.

Coming back to the negation of female performances, if we refer to the gender symbolism of (Courcy et al, 2011), coupled to the (MacDonald) Big Wheel rule which consist in trying to over shadow female performances, we will realize that it starts by giving less conducive working conditions (no working equipment's, no special bonuses, difficulties in logging and transportation) in order to ensure that the end result is a fiasco. This approach is particularly common with team sport such as volleyball, handball, basketball and football. This negligence is accompanied by little media attention to present their plight and magnify their performances. The media has made no effort to build and preserve the image of female sport role models Mbarga Bikié (2017). Instead they are in the search for faults to hammer on because controversies sell better when it concerns women. Ndole (2017) sees the mirror image of the majority of women who openly criticize the performances of women, wanting to make a comparison with male performances and play style rather than encouraging them, thereby giving more vigor to men.

Institutionally very few women have been uplifted to become role models or icons in our country. Mbango points out that she is one of the rare female *sporter* to receive national state honors for her bravery and determination in her strive for victory. She adds that if not for the fact that the Female AFCON was held in Cameroon, there would have been no state reception for them just as in the previous expeditions (Gold medal at the All African Games Maputo 2011, silver medal All African Games Brazzaville 2015, vice African champions in 2014). The national female basketball team after losing to Senegal in the 2016 AfroBasket finals in Yaounde received no official merits they were instead brutally sent out of the hotel because they demanded an upgrade of match bonus and special prices as with the male teams.

To further devaluate and minimize female hard earned successes, the men have adopted the spine over method wherein they attribute the performances to the great enlightened genius coaches who in almost all cases are men. 'When there is success, it is the intelligence of the trainer but the reverse is the fault of the lazy young girls who know nothing and understand nothing' (Mbango; Mbarga). It should be noted that in Cameroon, there are very few women in top service managerial position in sport. Kariuki Wamaitha, J. (2015:40) points out the case of Kenya saying 'factors affect women in leadership such as the gender bias in the appointment of sport officials...(Observed) that there was a feeling that women are better suited in carrying out expressive activities such as organizing meetings and also the attitude of a few women administrators that 'we don't hire the competition''. The above frustrations accumulated by female *sporters* have gone a long way to discourage many talented young girls to get involved in sport. Our next endeavor here will consist in reflexing on mechanisms to overcome the tides.

4.2. In the quest of a bright spring for lionesses

Individuals that get involved in sports just as any other socio-professional activity have the strong desire to be respected, recognized and earn a living out of it. Girls/women who get involve in sport at the (inter)national level are those that have won the battles against societal taboo (Mbango, 2017; Dongmo, 2017; Kariuki, 2015: 2) and prejudice. They have fully accepted the daughter-sister-wife-mother theory but have added the non-conformist aspect and got involved in sport participation. This section is concerned with aspects of gender frustration which needs to be (re)address by the society and administrative institutions for a better gender representation and recognition. One of the major bone of contention as concerns female sidelining in sports is the inequality in treatment vis-a-vis the men (before, during and after competition). The special attention given to the lioness's prelude and post female AFCON was mainly due to the fact that Cameroon was the host nation and had gained popular attention. Forbinake (2017) commented Presidents Biya's speech during the reception of the lionesses at the Unity Palace:

The head of state deliver a statement which essentially was a praise song for the exploits of the female lions. He said by their performance, the lionesses had carried out their assignment creditably and remains an example of courage, solidarity, team spirit, characteristics that show their love for the fatherland. “Cameroon says thank you” he told them, urging them, as they go back to their various clubs, to continue to carry Cameroon’s flag very high (Forbinake 2017:2).

Unfortunately this triumphant reception in honour of female sport successes are rear as before then only Mbango had received such a state decoration and national recognition after her Olympic victories of 2004 and 2008. Fegue Marie who won gold in the weightlifting event at the Glasgow Games never received such attention or recognition. It is worth noting here that the national female handball team returned to Cameroon on 14th December 2016 from Angola after participating and obtaining a bronze medal with a historic qualification for the next handball world cup scheduled for December 2017. This success was silent by state institution as they received no official recognition. These hand ballers just as the basket ballers who after taking second place during women AfroBasket organised in Yaoundé in 2016, were send out of the hotel like slaves without their bonus. These teams prepare (without water, equipment, transport facilities) and depart for competitions in anonymous ways and if not of a political ambition, their successes also stay underground (Mbanga 2107; Ndole 2017). One of the envisaged solutions to this situation is to provide suitable preparation conditions and equal bonus distribution to those representing the green-red-yellow flag (Mbango 2017).

The next antibiotic to help kill the patriarchal resistant virus in sport is the appointment of female management staff. The lack of role model at the head of female teams renders certain issues difficult to handle by men (Mbango, 2017; Kariuki, 2015). Are women unable to manage teams and produce good performances? Are they not having the same certificates and diplomas as their male counterparts? Are they born to be always second behind men? Must a leader be hard and reject authority? These questionings if objectively responded to will enable ours understand that women can deliver the good in and out of the pitch. It is said by some (Kariuki, 2015) that men consider emotively a poor leadership quality to be a pure female character trait. Many women around the globe today have climbed and are still climbing to the top of the political leadership ladder.

In the field of sport defeat is attributed to the athletes and victory to the trainer, this is particularly true of female teams (Ndole 2017) which are headed by men. All the fame and merits is attributed to the microscopic vision and analysis of the game by the trainer. Presently in Cameroon only one lady officiates as referee in the Elite One Football League and has ever officiated at the Cameroon National Cup Finals: Azentambong Carine who is also a Fifa referee. She is one of the three Cameroonians female referees serving at the international level.

Amongst the forty-four (44) national sports federations in Cameroon only two are headed by women and their leadership is put at stake. All other women in managerial positions are second not first, not female Secretary General in a federation or even a regional league president or secretary general. There are some female staff in the national teams who occupy secondary positions. In the male national football league Victorine Formum is the only lady who sits as coach on the bench of a male team. Mbango, Mbarga, Dongmo all regret the fact that women are not given much confidence in such position as they believe they can delivered the goods. Kinang (2017) is of the opine that women are slide-lined because those that had no merits were appointed and were unable to be up to expected standards. Regretting the fact that the merit factor Kaufman, P. and Wolff, E. A. (2010), is not the criteria used to appoint staff at the head of teams or sport administrative institutions. The casing error in appointment female staff in managerial and decision taking position has discredited the female folk (Oloko2017, Eleme, 2017). Another envisaged solution will be to review the relationship between media and female sporters:

Research showed that the media persisted in covering mainly male athletes. A consistent finding is the under-reporting of female athletes and their sporting events throughout all mass media, for example, in 1994 men were found to receive 93.8 per cent of coverage on US

television. Since the media are seen as helping to shape values, this severe under-representation creates the impression that women athletes are of little importance in the sporting world. The claim that women tend to be ‘symbolically annihilated (Bernstein A. and Blain N 2002: 7)

The above is still a reality in Cameroon as female sport receives less consideration as compared to male sport. At times even when female sport is put at the forefront the comments and the tone used is melancholic looking for the hair in the sauce. The media can react differently by projecting meriting female *sporters* to the forefront. Journalists have to invite these ladies to their programs and paint a brighter image of them with emphasis on their performances. Only in this way can they become role model and recognition (Mbango 2017; Oloko, 2017). Eleme was surprised that the Miss Lionne beauty contest did not feature in the news headlines of the major media houses (radio, newspaper, tv). This contest was to portray the femininity of female sports. It also helped kick against stereotypes on sport deforming and impact on child bearing as most of the contestants were mothers. The contest was also aimed at electing the most beautiful Indomitable Lioness of 2016. All those that took part were international athletes. Eleme Asse Marie. G. C (athletic) emerged winner, first runner up Ngon Ntame Victoire l’or (volleyball) and second runner up Nguiadem Kamdem Anney (football) as seen on the plat below.

Figure 1: Winners of the Miss Lionne 2017 Beauty Contest (Ngon Ntame left, Eleme Asse centre, Nguiadem Kamdem right)ⁱⁱ



Source: Eleme Asse photo collection, retrieved in Yaoundé on 12-02-2017

Such initiatives can help families have another regard on female *sporters* thereby inflicting deadly blows to stereotypes about sport and their participation. Again it will in the long run make acceptable female performances as everyone would familiarize his/herself with such performances. A lot of education should be done both horizontal and vertical to reduce psychological and mental barriers as concern female success in sport and society at large.

In this article, we have briefly summarized the situation of Cameroon female *sporters* who no matter the priorities on the field do not receive the required retribution and recognition. Based on the performance and experiences of the female international athletes we argue that the non-recognition and undermining of their performances in both institutional and socio-cultural. Using Harding social gender theory we demonstrated how our society is constructed and structured to remain patriarchal. In this mental and social frame no opportunity was given for any female intrusion as it was/is a ‘taboo for men to applaud female success.’ This research aims at creating awareness on educational norms and values we transmit to our children and the regard they should have about gender issues. We are of the opine that women be mentality decolonized before women as they have the knife in their procession. Just accepting to have female role models will be a major breakthrough in this period of social chaos. Social change and (re)valorization of the female folk will be beneficial to the development of our society and nation as a whole. A continues exclusion of the female folk from sport will lead to the auto destruction of the system and will affect the pillars of our civilization.

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