

# Parliamentary Oversight over the Policing of Gender and Women's Concerns in Cameroon

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## Abstract

Countries have long advocated for gender equality, emphasising the importance of women's representation in parliament. The prevalent belief that women can more effectively represent women's concerns than men is subject to debate. Globally, women are underrepresented in all levels of socio-political hierarchies and are often distant from decision-making processes. These challenges persist in social, economic, and political structures, including parliamentary systems. This research specifically delves into the challenges faced by parliamentarians in addressing gender issues and women's concerns in the CNA. The study was conducted at the Cameroon National Assembly (CNA) located in Yaoundé and focused on the members of parliament (MPs) who served during the 2013-2019 Parliamentary session, constituting a total population of 180 MPs. This research employed a qualitative methodology that encompassed both descriptive and explanatory elements. The researchers utilised convenience and purposive sampling techniques, leading to the participation of 5 female MPs and 4 male MPs in the study. According to Johnson (2006), it is noted that saturation typically manifests around 8 participants within a homogeneous group; hence, the intentional inclusion of 4 men and 5 women MPs aimed to achieve saturation and depth in the study. The primary method of data collection involved using semi-structured, open-ended interview guides and tape recordings to ensure comprehensive data acquisition from the respondents. The identities and real names of the respondents were deliberately omitted from the presentation of findings. The results revealed that gender issues are not effectively addressed in parliament. As a result, most policies enacted and projects undertaken by members of the CNA remain mostly gender neutral/blind, with gender issues often going unrecognised or being dismissed during sessions. Therefore, it is highly recommended to raise awareness among MPs in the CNA and build their capacity to be more gender sensitive and responsive in discussing topics during sessions and other parliamentary activities.

**Keywords:** Parliamentarians, Gender, Policing, Gender Issues, Women's concerns

## Introduction

Countries have long been advocating for gender equality between men and women. This has been the subject of many debates and discussions. However, gender disparities between men and women still exist in every sector, including political life (Tefera, 2010). This disparity is manifested, among other things, in terms of political representation, in which most women are still under-represented in parliament and other political spheres. Several studies conducted by UN Women (2014: 2) in global political relations indicate that women's parliamentary representation is at 21.8% globally. In specific cases, it is 42.1% for Nordic countries, 25.2% in the Americas,

18.9% in Asia, 13.4% in the Pacific, 17.8% in Arab states, and 22.9% in Sub-Saharan Africa; Cameroon experienced a slight increase of 31.1%. Women's representation in parliament is desired for many reasons, the major one being that women are human beings, and they deserve to participate in all aspects of life destined as human beings (Tefera, 2010). The other major reason is that women have a different experience from men. Likewise, women and men differ in terms of their gender roles, and, therefore, women's voice needs to be represented almost equally in parliament. Also, of importance is that women constitute more than half of the world's population, and the legitimacy of the liberal political theory of states requires that women be part of the seats in parliaments.

### **Women's Concerns and Parliament: Literature Survey**

The discussion thus far hangs on the assertion that women can represent women's concerns better than men. While this statement might have truth, the notion is open for debate. From a feminist perspective, it seems that the question of women's representation is not the question of the physical presence or descriptive representation of women in the parliament. Rather, having women in the parliament is a question of whether the interest of women, which needs to be well represented and well recognised in all decision-making, are taken into account. Concerning this standpoint, Mateo (2005) reported that men, although different from women in terms of their sex, can represent gender issues as long as the interests of women are well understood and included during parliamentary sessions.

Many African governments have adopted gender equality to improve their international image and secure development assistance, but they do not necessarily enforce gender equality in their laws. Instead, gender equality is often used as a way for a select few elite women to advance their careers. For example, in Cameroon, the number of women Parliamentarians (MPs) has increased from 13.3% to at least 31.1%, which shows progress. However, women still have limited influence in decision-making during parliamentary discussions in the Cameroon National Assembly (CNA). Women worldwide at every socio-political level are under-represented in parliament and far removed from decision-making levels. While the political playing field in different countries has its peculiarities, one feature remains common: it is uneven and not conducive to women's participation. Worldwide, women face barriers to participating in politics (Abdela, 2000). These barriers are found in prevailing social and economic spheres and even in existing political structures, including the parliament (Thanikodi & Sugirtha, 2007).

In many societies, traditional values continue to prioritise women's roles as mothers and homemakers, often reinforcing gender-segregated responsibilities. These cultural norms can impede women's advancement and involvement in political processes (Thanikodi & Sugirtha, 2007). The underrepresentation of women in parliament often stems from the patriarchal belief system concerning power dynamics between male and female MPs (Paxton, Pamela & Kuvotich, 2003). This imbalance limits women's active participation in influencing and voting on legislation related to gender issues and women's concerns. Furthermore, Krook (2010). Note that most women members of Parliament, especially the first-timers, are often unable to get support to police gender in parliament from their male colleagues on most occasions. The high-level intrigues and political manoeuvring which characterise business in parliament and other political forums serve to discourage many women who otherwise have a lot to offer. Most of the women legislators in parliament are solid professionals in various fields, and they bring a wealth of knowledge and leadership skills to the house; however, they never find the space for this to show.

Women's lack of confidence, as identified by Katy and Shipman (2014), is a significant factor contributing to their under-representation in formal political institutions such as parliaments,

governments, and political parties. With confidence and determination, women can attain top positions in the political process. Women must believe in themselves and dispel the widespread notion that men should be their only leaders. Women possess equal potential to men and should advocate for their rights, issues, and concerns (Abdela, 2000). Lack of confidence is described as fear on the part of women; “*being exposed or being afraid of making themselves look stupid*” hampers women from articulating gender issues and women’s concerns in parliament (Razak–Abubakari et al, 2014). Nevertheless, research carried out by Clavero & Galligan (2005) revealed that women politicians interviewed cited lack of confidence as a barrier, and were keen to stress that in their personal experience, this was not a problem for them. Respondents also tended to qualify the claim that lack of confidence constitutes a barrier to the supply and not the demand of women politicians, pointing out that this problem does not affect women who succeed in entering the world of politics.

Another barrier to the articulation of gender issues and women’s concerns in parliament relates to the treatment of women MPs by men MPs. Women MPs remain targets of dismissive remarks from male colleagues, MPs often wilfully ignore their female colleagues when they want to speak in meetings, and are the subject of patronising and disrespectful behaviour. The following quotation illustrates an experience by a female MP in research by Clavero & Galligan (2005; 988).

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During various discussions, everyone spoke up, I stood up and raised my hand ..., and I continued to be unnoticed. In the end, I stamped my feet ... But with a weaker personality, one can feel so less important ... They [women politicians] feel that they are not being noticed and choose to resign.

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Another obstacle facing women MPs is what Bauer (2010: 64) notes as the “*blame the victim*” syndrome, which holds that it is women’s fault that there are so few of them in decision-making positions. Women remain constantly reminded that they are the majority of the population and the majority of the voters. Thus, the reasoning goes, women should be able to elect women. In a study carried out by Bauer (2010; 64), a woman activist in Botswana reported that President Ian Khama said to her: “*Why don’t you (Women) go and elect yourselves?*”

Both women and men MPs are often unable to police gender issues and women’s concerns in parliament because they are gender blind/insensitive. Policing gender issues in parliament entails steps and actions taken by MPs in recognising gender gaps and gender discriminatory laws that place women and girls in subordinate positions both in the public and private spheres (Estlund, 2008). Equally, policing women’s concerns in parliament also requires actions by MPs in defending and upholding legislative laws and realising projects strictly related to women’s special needs, which are a result of their differences in their sexual reproductive roles (Celis, 2006).

According to the theory of Critical Mass as presented by Norris & Lovenduski (2001), the attainment of a critical percentage of women elected to Parliament, typically ranging from 25% to 30%, triggers a transformative impact on the institutional culture, political discourse, and policy agenda concerning gender-related issues and women’s concerns. In contrast, liberal feminists argue that the subordination of women stems from entrenched customary and legal restrictions that obstruct the entry and active participation of female MPs in parliamentary processes. They posit that when both male and female MPs possess equal opportunities and rights in parliamentary decision-making, women will assert greater influence over issues affecting them and broader societal concerns.

In Cameroon, Parliamentarians are interested in responding to party interests, neglecting gender issues and concerns, while women remain passive recipients rather than active participants in

parliament. Mrs Abena Ondoa née Obama Marie Thérèse, Minister of Women's Empowerment and the Family in Cameroon (MINPROFF), during an interview on the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) during the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission of the Status of Women in New York on March 2010, complained: "Women in parliament sit as passive recipients and not active participants in decision-making during parliamentary gatherings" (CRTV, 2010; Cameroon Election, 2013).

Proponents of critical mass noted that as the number of women increases in decision-making, women are more likely to influence their male colleagues to accept and approve policies and programs promoting women's interests in parliament. Assessment of the articulation of gender equality and women's empowerment by parliamentarians has to go beyond numbers to encompass the complex relationship between power and participation. It is therefore important to determine how both men and women parliamentarians handle gender-related issues during parliamentary deliberations

Cameroon is a signatory to most international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Africa Union (AU) Agenda 2063, and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to mention a few, promotes women's empowerment and emancipation in all ramification, it remains questionable if women's concerns and gender issues are deliberated and defended in Parliament. This research focuses on the challenges faced by parliamentarians in the policing of gender issues, Gender Issues and Women's Concerns in the CNA.

### Study Approach

The study was conducted at the Cameroon National Assembly (CNA) based in Yaoundé. Cameroon is a Central African nation in the Gulf of Guinea, bordered by Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. French and English are the official languages. The country is often referred to as "African in miniature" because of its geological and cultural diversity (African Studies Center, 2015). Yaoundé, nicknamed the "*City of Seven Hills*", hills: Akok Ndoue, Mbog Ndum, Minloa, Embaminala, Messa, Mbakol, and Febe. These hills are situated at the three distinct mountains that tower over the city, namely: Mbam Minkom (1295m), Mount Nkolodom (1221m), and Mount Eloudem (1159m). This study was done in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, located between latitudes 3°47' and 3°56' North of the Equator and between longitudes 11°10' and 11°45' East of the Greenwich Meridian of Yaounde in the Centre Region of Cameroon has a population of more than 2,440,462 inhabitants as of 2011. Yaoundé is a hilly and undulating city at 750m above sea level. Yaoundé lies at the centre of Cameroon at an elevation of about 750 metres (2500 ft) above sea level (Oben & Ndi, 2017).

This research is qualitative, and it adopts a descriptive research design. Based on the purpose of this study, the population for this study is members of parliament (MPs) in the Cameroon National Assembly (CNA); therefore, the total population is 180 members of parliament. Women MPs occupy 56 (31.1%) seats while men occupy 120 (68.9%) seats in the CNA. This research targets men and women MPs of the CNA of the 2013–2019 electoral mandates. The researchers selected the respondents through a list of all MPs of the 2013–2019 electoral mandates that was compiled using the CNA website. The compiled list comprised 56 female Members of Parliament (MPs) and 124 male MPs, totalling 180. The rationale behind this list was to ensure a comprehensive representation of both genders in the study. The study specifically honed in on MPs who had served in the CNA for a minimum of 3 years, as these individuals would have had substantial involvement in session or committee meetings, directly or indirectly addressing gender issues and the concerns of women in the nation.

The study employed two sampling techniques: convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling was selected based on the availability and accessibility of respondents, while purposive sampling was applied to ensure the representation of the total population. The sample consisted of 5 female MPs and 4 male MPs from both Anglophone and Francophone regions of Cameroon. According to Johnson (2006), saturation typically occurs around 8 participants in a homogeneous group; hence, the decision to include 4 men and 5 women aimed to achieve saturation. Moreover, to surpass the saturation threshold and provide complementary data, 9 participants were included in the study. The researchers set out to understand how members of parliament from different regions and genders voiced gender-related issues and women's concerns in parliament, as well as their positions on gender-related bills. Despite the notable prevalence of over 30% female Members of Parliament in Cameroon, certain regions lack female representation. The primary data collection method involved using semi-structured open-ended interview guide tape recordings to ensure comprehensive data acquisition from the respondents.

Given the bilingual nature of Cameroon and the use of English in this research, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Interviews conducted in French were translated into English and transcribed to facilitate analysis. The data was conscientiously represented using standardised methods, including distinct words, punctuation and capitalisation to improve clarity. Initial themes were carefully identified and cross-referenced with the transcripts to ensure a comprehensive understanding of themes. Subsequently, codes were developed based on these themes and applied to each transcript, following a thematic framework that directed the qualitative data analysis process. This systematic approach was crucial for organising open-ended interview data and combining it with other qualitative data for the current study.

To uphold confidentiality, the identities and real names of the respondents were deliberately omitted from the presentation of findings. Each respondent was assigned a letter of the alphabet from A to I for discussions and data presentation. It was communicated to the respondents that their participation was solely for academic purposes and to ensure research ethics. They were guaranteed the right to withdraw at any point during the research.

This research was carried out during the peak of the ongoing Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon, as such carrying out this research during this period was difficult for the researchers since the population for the study was scared to give out information for the study due to the fact they were scared of the unknown, most of the respondents for the study at the time had fled away from their constituent to seek refuge in Yaoundé. The fact that many top legal, legislative, government officers and local chiefs were targeted, killed, or ruthlessly beaten and abducted for ransom was the reason parliamentarians feared the unknown and, as such, were unwilling to release information needed for the research. One of them told the researchers: "... don't you know this is the wrong time for this exercise? You should wait until after the crisis before you can carry out this research."

The researchers had to travel to Yaoundé to meet the respondents with proof of authorisation from the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Buea; to carry out research with MPs in the CNA, the researchers equally assured them of anonymity and confidentiality with regard to the information they got from the respondents.

### **Analysis of Parliamentary Oversight over Women's Concerns**

In an in-depth analysis of the challenges related to the oversight of women's issues and gender-related concerns within the parliamentary activities of the CNA, survey respondents expounded on the impediments that hinder the effective monitoring of gender issues and women's concerns. A

majority of the respondents conveyed that gender issues are inadequately monitored in parliament due to the limited participation of women, a circumstance linked to the structural composition of the CNA. Consequently, despite the significant representation of women in parliament, their ability to actively engage and influence decision-making during parliamentary sessions and other activities is restricted. Respondent “E” stated: “...the structure of the house has an impact on decision making during the voting of bills as men influence decisions more than women MPs”.

A few respondents expressed the view that cultural stereotypes play a significant role in impeding the progress of women MPs. According to the respondent “A”, differences in social values and behavioural patterns between male and female MPs, with cultural limitations on women’s participation in meetings with men, pose a significant challenge. Respondent “I” emphasised that gender issues are often overlooked in parliament due to ingrained societal values and behavioural norms. On the contrary, a female participant believed there are no obstacles for women in parliament, asserting that male and female MPs have equal rights and opportunities for participation and decision-making in the CNA. Detailed analysis of the findings, revealed that the majority (6 out of 9) respondents think that the political manifesto of the various political parties of MPs in the CNA hinders MPs from policing gender in parliament; in the voice of respondent “F”, “We are all required to strictly adhere to the party’s manifesto and not to vote or debate based on our personal preferences in Parliament,” stated Respondent A. They also mentioned, “Our priority is to support our political manifesto over our interests, and unfortunately, our political manifesto rarely includes women’s interests.”

Another half of the respondents (55.5%) equally complained that stereotypes and culture are another challenge MPs face in policing gender in Parliament. In the words of respondent “B”, who said, “At times I feel like, to most women MPs it is right for men MPs to speak while we observe,” and in corroboration, respondent “E” said, “Most women MPs think men MPs should be the ones to influence and make decisions in parliament”.

Another substantive proportion (44.4%) pointed to the challenge associated with a limited number of women in parliament, which makes it difficult for gender issues/women’s concerns to be policed in parliament. The reason why respondent “I” affirms “the number influences voting results when bills are voted” and in corroboration, respondent “C” affirms that “There are not enough women to influence bill voting”. Only one respondent thought that most MPs are not gender literate; respondent “D” asserted that “Most of us MPs have little or no knowledge of gender and its importance.”

The study also revealed that the establishment of common routines and cultures within the National Assembly (CNA) contributes to the stereotyping of male and female Members of Parliament (MPs). These labels hinder the progress of promoting gender issues and women’s concerns in Parliament. The CNA culture is patriarchal, which significantly affects the socio-political aspects of passing gender-sensitive bills in Parliament. Supporting this claim, 55.5% of the respondents expressed that stereotypes and culture pose challenges for MPs in addressing gender issues in Parliament. One respondent, “B,” remarked, “At times, I feel that most women MPs think it’s more appropriate for male MPs to speak while we observe.” Additionally, respondent “E” stated, “Many women MPs believe that male MPs should hold the influence and make decisions in Parliament.” The aforementioned results are in line with the assertion made by Mrs. Abena Ondoa née Obama Marie Thérèse, Minister of Women’s Empowerment and the Family in Cameroon (MINPROFF), during an interview on the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) during the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission of the Status of Women in New York on March 2010, complained: “Women in parliament sit as passive recipients and not active participants in decision-making during parliamentary gatherings” (CRTV, 2010; Cameroon Election, 2013).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The result revealed that gender issues are not policed in parliament; consequently, most policies/bills enacted and projects carried out by members of the CAN are often gender neutral, the CNA remains mostly gender neutral, so gender issues are not recognised as such, and are often waved or shelved. The lack of policing or very little policing is associated with who is responsible or better suited to do policing. Women MPs believe men MPs ought to police because they constitute the majority representation in the CNA and are better placed than women MPs; they equally find it wrong to speak or challenge men, a common phenomenon in most cultures in Cameroon. Implicitly, the structure and culture of the parliament seem patriarchal and may not be gender friendly to discuss gender issues and foster gender equality. Judging from findings, it is not just the number of women vis-à-vis men parliamentarians in the CNA that hinders the articulation and policing of gender issues; it was discovered that most of the MPs were not gender literate. In addition, most MPs have little or no knowledge of how and why to pursue and promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Which challenges male hegemony and power relations? The findings in the study equally revealed that women's empowerment is not actively promoted in parliament, although Cameroon is a signatory to AU 2063, SDGs 2030, GESP, etc. It is clear that issues of women and their empowerment are often not proposed or discussed in Parliament during committee meetings, sessions, or other Parliamentary activities, and if brought up, they are often waved away or shelved.

It is therefore of utmost importance to raise the awareness of MPs in the CNA by building their gender capacity in a bid to ensure they are gender sensitive/responsive in topics raised during sessions or other parliamentary activities. The building/enhancement of the knowledge, skills, and attitude on gender issues would enable MPs to respond to the Practical Gender Needs and Strategic Gender Needs of women and men; remove the barriers to women's full participation; ensure operations and resources are used effectively towards promoting gender equality; ensure parliament has no substantive, structural or cultural barriers to women's full participation; set standard for other parliamentarians. More so, since MPs show their allegiance to party manifestos during parliamentary activities and Cameroon has ratified several international conventions on fostering women's empowerment and gender equality, engendering party manifestos is a logical way of getting more MPs to police gender issues and women's concerns in the CNA.

This work is based on the premise that party manifesto and gender-blind/neutral bills/policies and projects of members of parliament are the reason for MPs' inability to police women's concerns and gender issues in the CNA, as such, the study is relevant in the fields of gender studies and political science, because it provides knowledge on an evaluation of the right theories and mechanisms researchers in the aforementioned fields and social science in general need to address and agender political issues on Politics and MPs and their various constituencies in Cameroon.

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