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Gender Considerations in the Study of Science and Technology in Anglophone Cameroon
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Gender Considerations in the Study of Science and Technology in Anglophone Cameroon

When the Germans, who colonised the erstwhile Kamerun after the partition of Africa in 1884, were defeated during the First World War, the League of Nations placed Cameroon under the protectorate of the French and British rule. French- speaking Cameroon gained independence in 1960 and was later joined in 1961 by the English- speaking Cameroon, hereafter known as Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon, respectively. As a consequence, Cameroon's educational system is fashioned along the lines of the French and British systems, which many argue is a reflection of Cameroon's rich cultural diversity. From the nursery through primary to post-secondary school level, the English and French models have respectively existed predominantly in Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon. In 1972, Anglophone Cameroon was cartographically configured into two provinces, the South West and North West, whose population stands at about three million (National Institute of Statistics, 2001). The influence of French and the demographic and geographic superiority of the Francophone Cameroon, with eight provinces and a population according to the National Institute of Statistics (2001) of 12,294,768, have since served as a road map for the course of tertiary education in Cameroon. This has led to a binary system of universities and "grandes ecoles" or specialised institutions, commonly called professional schools. It is at this level that Anglophone students are faced with a myriad of problems, especially in the study of science and technology subjects in institutions where French is the medium of instruction as most of them are based in Francophone Cameroon.

Anglophone Cameroon and Cameroon in general is a patriarchal society that has enabled stereotypes to be passed on from one generation to another. Historically, women, especially in Africa, were involved in subsistence agriculture for food supplies while men did hunting and rearing of cattle and domestic animals (Schapera, 1984). As a consequence, the intellectual world, both politically and spiritually, was dominated by the male folk and women had no legal status. The vested control of women's labor by men was passed on to their sons. However, Driel (1994) argued that the arrival of Christianity in Africa in the middle of the 19th century, coupled with colonialism at the end of the century, brought in new norms and values. Christian churches offered women Western style ideals such as individualism and personal autonomy, opportunities for leadership, and self-expression and education (Walker, 1990). More women than men joined churches, especially as men were frequently away and many opposed Christian teachings on aspects such as polygamy and initiation rites. The church focused its attention on "remodelling" women and this promoted women's

involvement in new norms and values. While women and girls were confronted with new Western styles of education, men were confronted with new styles through migration. This differentiation between the experiences of Western styles for men and women provided new opportunities, which accelerated the process of changing gender relations brought about by Christianity, trade, and the introduction of wage labour (Schapera, 1970).

This paper explores gender imbalances in the study of science and technology subjects in Anglophone Cameroon. Because of the lack of statistics from the newly created tertiary institutions in Anglophone Cameroon, they are not taken into consideration in this study. Data are generated from the Cameroon Statistical Yearbook as well as other documentary sources.

Overview of Related Literature

This paper is related to the strand of literature concerning theoretical determinants of the preference for investing in the education of boys rather than girls, though this is becoming blurred. At the dawn of a new millennium when the role of women is increasingly being recognised in contributing to the building of the nation, Okeke (1990) claimed that science and technology could revolutionise agriculture through increased production and high yield with crop varieties leading to increase in Gross Domestic Product. Also, science and technology, if well entrenched in the society, could lead to proper management of plant and animal diseases, introduction of efficient methods of food storage, and preservation and distribution, especially as women are heavily involved in this sector. The Cameroonian women contribute significantly to the agricultural sector. Wangusa (n.d.) estimated that rural women supply about 90% of the food needed for the subsistence of the population in Cameroon.

On the basis of traditional stereotypes, Ouendji (2000) stated that in times of economic recession, parents prefer to pay for their boys' education. This view is supported by Tamale and Oloka-Onyango (2000) who are of the opinion that parents, in choosing to invest in boys' education, reinforce the fact that girls are seen as those who have other choices, such as marriage, unlike boys who have to struggle to raise a family in the future. Education is seen as an investment that will be reaped in the future, but girls are viewed as "property" of other people when they subsequently marry.

The adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) led to drastic cuts in public employment and state involvement in social provisioning. Many children in Anglophone Cameroon have indirectly been denied the basic tenets of cheap and free education as a result of the SAP since many impoverished parents cannot afford to send all their children to school, and, as a result, prefer to send boys only. The SAP prescriptions restricted further recruitment into the public service except some "strategic ministries" such as defense and national security. This has discouraged many parents and girls to seek education of any kind, especially with the weak private sector that has no potential in absorbing many graduates. Many graduates in Cameroon, especially girls, can be found in restaurants, bars, telephone booths, salons, second-hand clothing stores, small scale farming, petty trading, and other informal activities. Many of the women in this region who are professionals are mainly in the nursing and teaching professions and a vast majority are in the unskilled labor force. The effects of SAP amount to what Tamale and Oloka-Onyango (2000) termed as "a case giving with one hand what is taken away with the other (p. 11)".

The power structure above all places greater value to the education on boys than girls and generally discriminates against women in all spheres of life. As Etta (1994) aptly described, "boys are generally socialised to be inquiring, adventurous or venturesome, conquer or at the very least understand nature while girls are expected to be obedient, malleable and traditional preservers of nature (p. 71)". Etta further noted with dismay that the tragic situation in which women themselves are the chief agents of the socialization confers inequality on their children, especially girls. Similarly, within the arsenal of gender related assaults on girls are the insidious, ridiculous, and abusive language inflicted by classmates. Sometimes they are

mockingly called "iron ladies" or "women-men" (Etta,1994). This is very common in science and technology classes, which are seen by the male folk as a domain of men and do not see why girls should intervene and challenge the status quo.

Gender Education in Anglophone Cameroon

The table below shows the enrolment of pupils and students in institutions of learning in Anglophone Cameroon.

Table 1

Number of schools and Students/pupils enrolment in Anglophone Cameroon at various levels of education in 2000

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