

HEHD RESEARCH BRIEF

Cameroonian Women's Empowerment in and through Higher Education

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About this Brief

The concerted efforts of scholars, development agents and governments have promoted the idea that education is both intrinsically and instrumentally good, life-changing, has direct returns, and is particularly empowering for women. This has resulted in the taken-for-granted assumption that an educated woman is an empowered woman, and the more educated a woman is, the more empowered she will be.

A research project conducted between 2018 and 2020 set out to address this problematic assumption regarding Cameroonian women's automatic empowerment through higher education. The research argued that an evaluation of Cameroonian women's empowerment through higher education requires the engagement of Cameroonian women themselves in the conceptualisation of what empowerment means for them. Likewise, that the multivariate oppressions and the diversity in Cameroonian women's experience of gender and education necessitate the layering of frameworks (here and African feminisms and Capability Approach) for a contextually relevant and intersectionality-sentient appraisal of women's empowerment and the interrogation of higher education's ability to enable it.

This policy brief presents the key findings and recommendations of the research project to demonstrate the difference employing an African-feminist Capability Approach can make in the interrogation of African gender issues (such as women's empowerment needs), as well as a better evaluation of African institutions (such as higher education).

The Research Rationale:

In Cameroon, the Pidgin-English phrase '*too much book*' is used to capture the notion of being overeducated, particularly with regards to women. While enrolment figures show that general education is valued for both genders in most of the country, Cameroonian women soon bump up against an invisible line that determines that they have had 'enough' education. This line typically falls at the end of a woman's first tertiary qualification; a

woman's education is seen as acceptable and adding value up till postgraduate level at which point it succumbs to a law of diminishing returns.

On the other hand, international development agencies promote global education targets. These paint all educated women as 'empowered' thereby ironically confirming the stereotype that a woman with 'too much' education is a threat to men and traditional society as a whole. However, research shows that the empowerment of women by higher education is conditional and far from guaranteed. Moreover, empowerment itself is a fluid concept that must be contextualized and cannot be assumed as an educational outcome.

The assumption of Cameroonian women's empowerment through higher education therefore generates two problems: 1) it promotes the limitation of young women's aspirations and 2) it generates an incomplete informational basis for government (and public) judgement of higher education outcomes for women.

The Research Framing:

The research study from which this brief is developed set out to investigate conceptualisations of empowerment by and for Cameroonian women by both engaging participants (using narrative and participatory empirical-research methods), and engaging alternative theorising for the development of an original Capabilitarian application - the African-feminist Capability Approach.

Using narrative inquiry, I engaged 20 female, second-year masters students from four higher education institutions in Cameroon. The inquiry produced conceptualizations and considerations of empowerment which were then used to interrogate if and how their higher education enables what is necessary for Cameroonian women to consider themselves and to be considered empowered.

Through my engagement of participants via participatory analysis and rich life-story interviews, I was able to expand both my capabilities as a researcher and theirs as participants to capture understandings of empowerment and self-assessments of how empowered these women felt they are.

Likewise, given that applications of the Capability Approach typically engage with mainstream Western-feminist thought, my integration of the Capability Approach with African-feminist thought generated an application better able to capture intersections of African women's (dis)empowerment and provide an Africa-centred response to gender issues.

Interrogation by more usual feminist-informed applications of the Capability Approach of women's valued beings and doings would be limited in this Africa context. In contrast, the

African-feminist Capability Approach questions what African women [would] be able to be and do not only taking into consideration of gender inhibitions and stereotypes, but equally considering the intersection of colonial legacies, ethnicity, religion and so on.

In this way the project not only illustrated collaboration in theoretical framing but also in methods for more contextually-relevant knowledge creation.

A Few Key Findings:

Through the original use of a joint African-feminist Capability Approach and the collaborative methodology employed in this study, the following findings were made:

1. To Cameroonian women, empowerment must be additive, multi-dimensional and requires a delicate balance.

Similar to what is reported in established literature, Cameroonian women in this study conceptualized empowerment with use of aspects such as voice, decision-making power, financial independence, knowledge, recognition, and self-confidence. However, findings here differ from previous research as it was revealed that the attainment of these aspects *by themselves* would not equate to empowerment for the majority of Cameroonian women. That is to say, through their life-stories and participatory analysis exercise, the women exposed the how necessary it was to hold multiple factors of empowerment concurrently for actual empowerment. Possession of one aspect without the other, such as income without self-authorisation, results in limited empowerment. In this way, this study presents empirical evidence for the argument of intersectional framing to assess and propose solutions to women's (dis)empowerment.

Likewise, findings here also demonstrate the complexity of acquiring aspects of empowerment for Cameroonian women, given that not all aspects of empowerment are equally valuable and possessing some aspects of empowerment- such as education- without others may disadvantage in this non-ideal real-world context.

Finding that empowerment here must be additive to address multidimensional oppressions and be balanced/negotiated to ensure impact demonstrates the significance of conceptualizing from the ground up prior to making judgements of certain areas and people.

2. A joint African-feminist Capability Approach offers an appropriate conceptualisation of empowerment in this context.

With this study, I proposed that a joint African-feminist Capability Approach can expose the intersectionality of oppressions and underscore the depth and variety of needs which are often underappreciated in other studies of empowerment through education. The findings here affirmed my hypothesis. The questions generated by merging two frameworks made for an enriching interrogation of what has been assumed by society of higher education's capacity for empowerment as well as what is assumed/internalized by the higher-educated women of themselves. Moreover, the combination of Capabilitarian and African-feminist thought enabled a revision of existing operationalizations to produce better suited

instruments for assessments of what empowerment is and what an empowering education would be in this context.

3. Cameroonian women's empowerment through higher education is conditional and assumptions that higher education guarantees empowerment should be reconsidered.

The research unearthed empirical data which exposes the unpredictability of Cameroonian women attaining empowerment in and through higher education. Findings make it clear that the prospect of higher education being empowering for a Cameroonian woman is dependent on a variety of factors: internalised values, practical and strategic needs, oppressions, freedoms, quality of education, aspirations and so on. These are often linked to identifiers beyond gender, such as religion, class, family structure, linguistic group, which intersect to either expand or diminish the prospects of higher education's capacity to empower. Through the rich narrative data and participant's own analysis of their higher education experiences, the study proves that generalisations must not be made of Cameroonian women's empowerment through higher education without due consideration of the complex empowerment needs which their higher education would have to meet for it to be adequately empowering.

4. Higher education in Cameroon requires improvement by way of decentralizing, engendering and decolonising.

Upon analysis with the African-feminist Capability Approach it was made clear that Cameroonian higher education often contributes to disempowering Cameroonian women (rather than empowering them as is assumed). In its current state, Cameroonian higher education institutions perpetuate and preserve inequalities, biases and divisions linked to both coloniality and patriarchy. This research illustrates how the centralized nature of higher education institutions, the colonial foundations of the institutions, the dearth of gender sensitive policies, lack of measures to ensure student well-being, quality of education and more all render higher education an unstable venture for fostering Cameroonian women's empowerment.

5. Higher education in Cameroon does not sufficiently enable aspects necessary for women to consider themselves and to be considered by scholarship as empowered.

In the end, the findings of my research clearly exhibit the insufficiency of higher education as it is now to facilitate the sort of empowerment which these women value and require as per the African-feminist Capability Approach conceptualising of empowerment. As such, the findings suggest a need to address the language in international development campaigns which equate an educated woman with an empowered woman and fuel stereotypes such as 'too much book'.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice:

Given the findings of my study, I present the following recommendation:

To the wider body of gender/feminist researcher working in African contexts:

- 1) In doing research, particularly feminist research in Africa, engage with indigenous methodologies. With regards to the research of African issues and African contexts, mainstream research theory and practice has been found particularly wanting as Afrocentricity asserts that most research is constructed within a system of Western coloniality necessitating the re-centring of African thought and experiences in the examination of African subjects. In agreement with the above criticisms, I recommend that scholars of African contexts and issues be required to at the very least engage with indigenous epistemologies. This research exemplifies the benefits of combining research frameworks to unearth more nuanced and contextually relevant data; the African-feminist Capability Approach made considerable difference in the re-conceptualizing of empowerment for this context and the evaluation of higher education's empowering potential for Cameroonian women.
- 2) Consider participatory methods in as much as is possible. Mainstream Western research practice has been criticised for the power imbalances between researchers and participants and various aspects of unfairness in the generation of knowledge, otherwise known as epistemic injustices. Through the method of participatory analysis, I was able to centre African women not merely as subjects of the research but equally as co-constructors in knowledge production; as a result I able to diminish some of the epistemic injustice that such research is known for. It is imperative that we do more empowering research, especially when studying concepts such as empowerment.

To Cameroonian higher education practitioners and policy makers

- 3) Invest in research to develop a strategy for decolonizing and engendering higher education institutions. Higher education administrators much consider a national review of systems adopted from colonialism and subsequently with neoliberal influence. The decolonizing of Cameroonian higher education is imperative for delivering quality education for all ends- women's empowerment inclusive.
- 4) Develop a universal standard for state higher education institutions. Differences in the structure, content and delivery of higher education across state institutions in Cameroon are too great and this much be addressed with some form of harmonization. It is imperative that students of state institutions at the very least receive similar opportunities, resources and that staff abide by similar standards. There must common instruments by which to evaluate higher education quality and measures to ensure standards are upheld across the country.