

Women in Psychology in the 21st Century: Contributions and Challenges: The Case of Cameroon

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Abstract

Historically, women in psychology were few yet their contributions were great. Girls' interests in psychology per se were greatly reduced as only few girls registered for the programme. When qualified Cameroonians, especially women who studied in English speaking universities from abroad returned home, a conflict emerged because of the bicultural nature (English and French) of the country. The misconceptions that only those trained in France were psychologists, deterred professional development and engagements in research, community outreach and development. This absence of recognition led to the creation of an environment that was not enabling for the involvement of women in psychological activities even in the creation of an association. The absence of women is glaring and their contributions very invisible on this account. Globalisation has greatly influenced the African social and cultural landscape in a variety of ways that are theoretical and conceptual. Women psychologists are not motivated to address these issues in context on account of mis-education. Today many young women are entering the field but they lack leadership from senior colleagues who should act as role models for many reasons some of which are not of their making. The issues of equality and access that were greatly addressed in Beijing in 1995 still persist and are addressing deculturalisation in the case of Cameroon to change mindset. The field for intervention for Women in psychology is enormous. This paper draws from empirical findings and literature to illustrate the significance of women in psychology in this era of globalisation.

Key Concepts: Women, Psychology, Misconceptions, Deculturalisation, Globalisation & Obstacles.

Introduction

Recognition of women's efforts and levels of participation is somehow improving particularly with the impact of globalisation, influencing the African social and cultural landscape. This demonstrates an evolving trend even with challenges. However, it is sad to note that as professionals, women psychologists are not visible in Cameroon.

Historically, the contributions of great women psychologists were only recorded in literature in later years. Some of these great women (Anna Freud, 1895-1982; Karen Horney, 1885-1952; Mary Calkins, 1863-1926; and Melanie Klein, 1882-1960), made ground breaking contributions in academia in the first part of the 20th century. Their actions were driven by their internal dispositions. Women in psychology in the 21st century should be driven by internal forces through education and new world trends as a function attitudinal change and changing mind-set. Held socio-cultural beliefs have been contributory factors to some of the negative views about what are capable of doing. On the other hand, Beijing gave women the courage to transcend barriers and difficulties and boosted their self-image and self-esteem in their respective professions to enable them engage fully in sustainable development process. Today, women are asking questions, making their voices to be heard and not being silent in development issues in their environment. Women are changing their everyday thinking and behaviours thus redirecting the wheel to their advantages.

In the case of psychology as a discipline, many young girls and women are entering the field. It is not clear whether they understand the scope and potential of the professional values of this discipline that could enable them to impact their different communities and social policy. As more women engage in the study of psychology, there is need to shift from seeing psychology only as a static academic discipline to a discipline that is dynamic. Women's major roles in development and nurturing necessitate understanding of its potentials to orient the improvement of the wellbeing of others by eliminating discriminatory practices and develop individuals' capacity.

Background

Women are agents of change. Besides the fact that they have the natural right and natural role to bear and take care of children, there is no denying that they are the managers of the environment. This, points to the strategic position of women in every society in their reproductive and productive activities. Women contribute to determine the character of a nation, because the quality of a nation's offspring and the society largely depends on the woman's nurturing skills.

African women's fundamental contributions in their households, food production systems and national economies are now being acknowledged, within Africa and by the international community (Manuh, 1998). So improving women's own positions as social and economic agents should strengthen African societies. If women are seen as one of Africa's hidden growth

reserves, then they must be ensured full access to social resources to enable them assume their significant role in Africa's socio-economic development. Women contribute 52% of the population, 75% of agricultural activities and 80% of production (AGDI, 2009). Their role in agricultural activities needs much support. Women psychologists' outreach activities should be a booster to women's empowerment process.

Some basic theoretical views:

- Darwin's evolutionary theory had underscored the belief that women were inferior intellectually and physically. A view based on the fact that men are thought to be exposed to far greater selective pressures than women.
- The changing trends today require a re-evaluation of attitudes which had influenced thinking about women, based on both scientific theory and cultural perspectives. If we revisit genetics today there will be evidence that should highlight the superiority of women in some aspects of life and development. Today with women's achievements generally the Darwinian inferiority hypothesis needs to be revisited.
- Cognitive developmental psychology attaches value to behaviour which is self-reinforcing and emphasising motivation. Is there any wonder that women's cognitive authority in their maternal role as pedagogues and managers of the environment cannot be questioned.
- Women have often played leadership roles or taken the lead in promoting environmental ethics and reusing and recycling resources to minimize waste and excessive consumption.
- Women, especially indigenous women, have particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management.
- Women in many communities provide the main labour force for subsistence production; hence, their role is crucial to the provision of food and nutrition, the enhancement of the subsistence and informal sectors and the preservation of the environment.

Rationale

Psychology is becoming an increasingly female-dominated discipline at the undergraduate and post graduate levels in most institutions in Cameroon. Yet very few are advancing in their careers as psychologists or engaging in outreach activities in support of their communities based on the issues mentioned above. In Cameroon, there are two education sub-systems with different philosophies and psychologists with English background encounter obstacles in their career progression. They are discriminated against in many ways by their French speaking colleagues. Lack of understanding of differences in educational systems and practices creates blockage for advancement. This paper, searches to know how female psychologists are oriented by their discipline as psychologists to engage in activities for development.

Research Method

Research Design

The study employed a survey questionnaire design whereby data was collected online for three weeks. The study targeted all available female psychologists in Cameroon the number of which are not many.

Sample and Sampling

The sampling procedure was purposeful with a sample size of 11 psychologists with minimum qualification of Master's degree in Psychology in both English and French systems of Education.

Instrument

The questionnaire was the only instrument for the study having eight main items requiring qualitative responses.

Item A. demanded Demographic Information and Marital /Parity Status.

Item B. questioned their engagements in Research Activities at National / International levels.

Item C. solicited for actions undertaken with other women to promote their contributions to psychology and Item D. improve the quality of women's lives as a Psychologist in the areas of: (a) Promote the health and well-being of women (b) Identify and eliminate discriminatory practices against women, (c) Enhance women's leadership in Cameroon and (d) collaborate to achieve the empowerment of Cameroonian girls and women. Item E. inquired about their perceptions regarding the impact of the Beijing Framework of Action in how it has helped to promote the generation and communication of knowledge about women. Item F, focused on knowing perspectives and problems/ resolving strategies by identifying some of the obstacles encountered in their career progression and how they overcome them and whether their perception of career progression depend largely on adding job skills or changing everyday thinking and behaviours? Given that Cameroon is bilingual and has two educational sub-systems, it was also important to find out whether this has any implications on how psychologists from these systems are perceived generally and female psychologists in particular by each cultural group? On this account there is need to seek their opinion on whether they create an association for Women psychologists in Cameroon generally or specifically for only English speaking psychologists.

Data processing and analysis

Data was processed using the standard content analysis procedure. Concepts were then analyzed to appreciate their level of emphasis and degree of the effects.

Findings

Demographic Information

The ages of the women ranged from 29 to 52 years with a mean of 42 years and a median age of 47 years which means half of them were aged 47 and above. Their level of education ranged

from PhD, DEA to Master's degrees, with the majority (7: 66.6%) having a PhD. The following professional statuses were recorded: Teaching/lecturer/assistant lecturers (7), Counselors (3), School guidance (2). Only two of the interviewees had post of service namely Service Head and regional inspector and both of them were of the more aged median group (48 years and 52 years old). Research areas are related to their specialty.

Membership in Research Associations in Psychology:

Eight (72.7%) of the respondents had membership in Research Association in Psychology. The following associations were recorded: IACCP (4), ISSBD (4), ROCARE (1), with two of them belonging to two different associations. Of more recent times with the creation of the association for English speaking Psychologists all of them have registered as members. Three of them said they had participated in meetings organized by these associations. However, it was clear that such participation was not regular...

Collaborating research organizations:

Four of them have done research with PLAN International while 6 said others. The following main areas of research were recorded and related to areas of specialty in psychology as presented in Figure 1

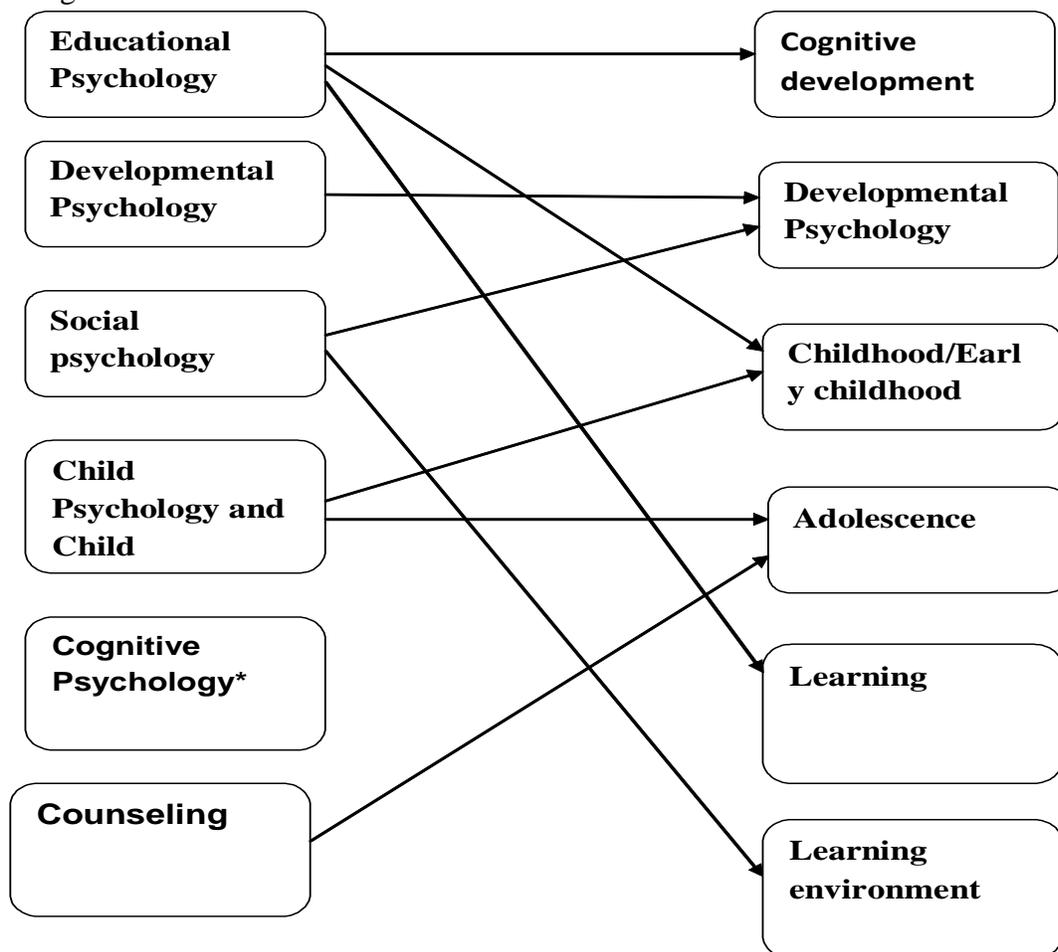


Figure 1: Main Research Areas

Actions undertaken as Psychologists to promote women's development

These women worked with rural and urban women through the churches, tribal groups, the community and the media.

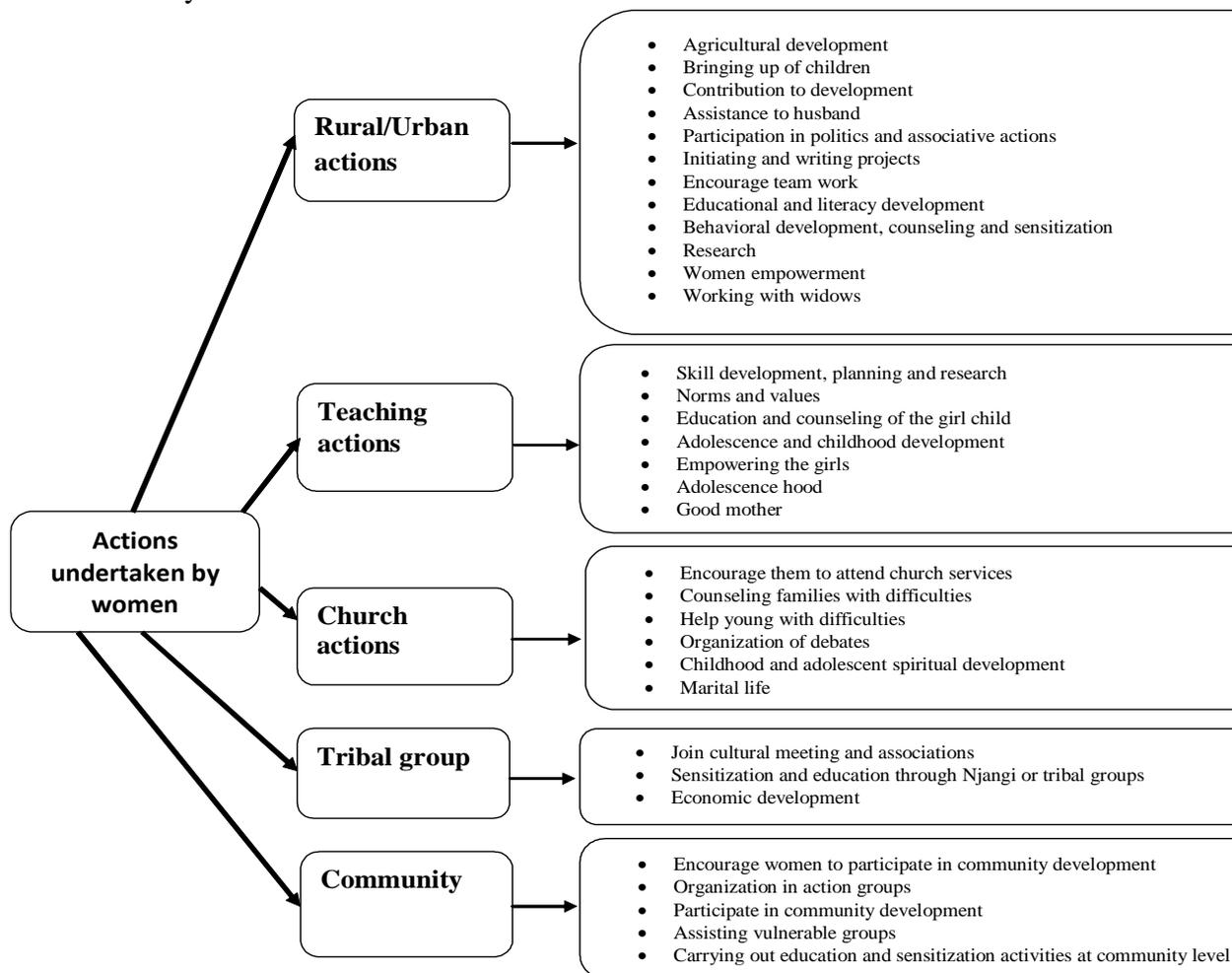


Figure 2: Reach out Activities

Collaborating strategies to achieve the empowerment of Cameroonian girls and women

- Provide fertilizer to some women in the villages to help them improve on their farming since the soil is not all that fertile
- Encourage girls not to shy away from science subjects like Mathematics Physics, Chemistry etc.
- Assist vulnerable groups and visit children in orphanages and provide assistance: psychologically, spiritually, financially and materially.

- Sensitize the community on the dangers of sexual promiscuity, Occultism in Schools and Career Education.

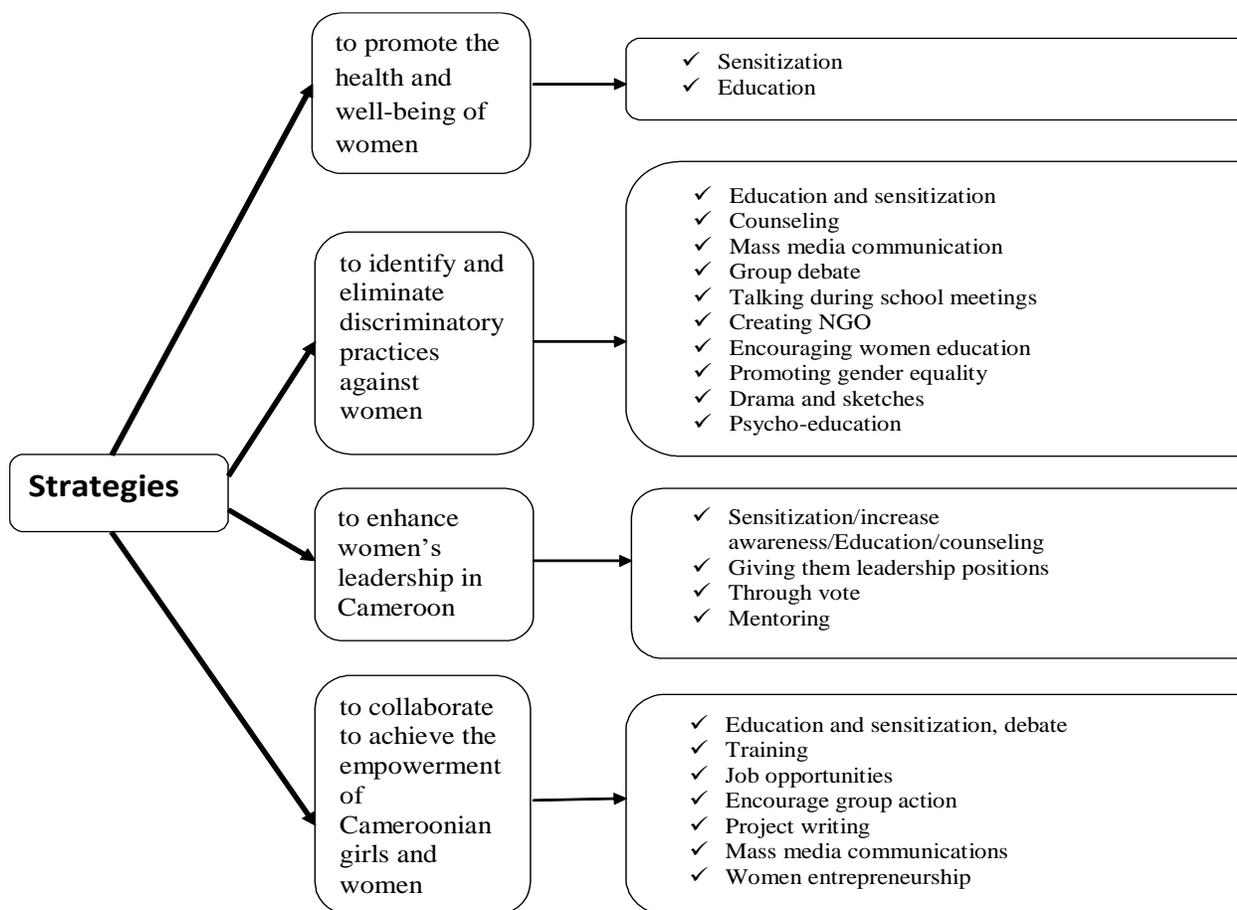


Figure 3: Reach out Strategies

Beijing's framework and the promotion, generation and communication of knowledge about women.

- Creation of social networks in different dimensions link to women's empowerment to challenge prejudices against women.
- Through publications, women have become out spoken and they now know their rights which are respected.
- Nomination of women, many more women are being appointed to higher posts.
- Awareness raising campaigns on critical issues.

Barriers & Challenges encountered for career progression and how these were overcome

- "Discrimination from male colleagues who always suppressed some of the ideas I give just because I am a woman. I tried to overcome this by always contributing my own ideas and insist no matter the situation. This has helped to eliminate this discrimination."

- “To overcome discrimination and tribalism I cultivated the virtues of patience and hard work”
- The “Non-recognition of my abilities and effort as a woman, senior educationist and child psychologist, constituted a major barrier in my professional life. I have always tried to impose myself and create an impact, whenever I have the opportunity”
- “Progression in career is complicated as competence is not the basis for promotion. Younger male colleagues are appointed as bosses”.
- “Lack of encouragement from the authorities.”
- “Lack of solidarity among women”.

Career progression dependent on adding job skills or changing everyday thinking and behaviours

- Changing everyday thinking and behaviours was seen by many of these women as crucial to cope with all the challenges they are encountering.
- Matured thinking and appropriate behavioural manifestations were considered important to enhance professional progress.

Bilingual nature of Cameroon and its implications

The bilingual culture of Cameroon affects peoples’ perceptions in different ways. The French speaking colleagues feel that they know more psychology than their English speaking counterparts. Psychology is a relatively new discipline in the English speaking sector of Cameroon. Psychologists and particularly female psychologists still have to make their impact felt. Majority of people are not aware of the existence of psychologists in Cameroon.”

An Association for psychologists in Cameroon

- Many different views were given about how many associations should exist to avoid the linguistic obstacles.
- Moreover the absence of an association be it for English speaking, French Speaking or female or male has been a great obstacle for professional progress as psychologists.

Discussion

From the findings of the study, women psychologists in Cameroon are assuming roles that are advisory, mentoring, lobbying and advocacy for examples in their respective communities but unfortunately not in decision making at Government level as a professional group. Women in psychology need to acquire the right skills and capacity, and be mentored in harnessing their abilities to contribute to sustainable growth and development. This can only be possible when they have the support to enable them engage in serving through outreach activities that would impact the lives of others. The Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995 and its progeny the Beijing Platform of Action marked a watershed event in the history of local and global women’s

movements. The awareness of women's role created by Beijing has made women as whole to become more self-assertive and advanced social activities.

Conclusion

Self-knowledge and self-awareness that are building up among women today, is a type of Cultural Revolution as women in general and women psychologists in particular have now developed new ways of thinking necessary for globalisation. The character of women is evolving and leadership is about character. Women today want reciprocity and mutuality on a two-way street. Women are becoming more integrated human beings.

Psychology as a scientific discipline has illustrated its potentials in impacting the lives of those whom it has become their specialty. These specialists have many opportunities to make incremental contributions towards development as role models, mentors and other contributions that had been gendered with no discrimination.

Recommendations

Based on the purpose of this study three major recommendations are stated: Firstly, it is important to address the political, economic and social relations having implications for the promotion of women in psychology. Secondly, there is urgent need to support women psychologists' role as development agents encouraging their research agendas and activities for capacity building. Thirdly, gender gaps need to be transformed by examining the structures, processes and mechanisms that sustain gender inequity in a profession as psychology.

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