

Stability and Change in the Representations of Female Politicians in Cameroon

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Women's participation in politics is low throughout the world – also in Cameroon. In this article we examine young Cameroonians perceptions of women politicians. To analyse Cameroonians perceptions of women in politics from a perspective of change we took social representations theory (SRT) as our theoretical starting point. All together 45 Anglophone and Francophone students participated in eight focus groups discussions conducted in 2011 in Buea, Cameroon. Our analyses showed that women's political participation questions some self-evident antinomies such as men/women, tradition/modern, domestic/politics, leader/follower and public/private. The talk about female politicians is tension between stability and change. We identified several rhetorical resources–anchors and objectifications– such as African context, tradition, religion, male icons and conflict, which were used to maintain the stability. We argue that complementarity and respect are the main themata in Cameroonian society that maintain the stability and gender roles and do not allow the representation of female politician to develop.

Keywords: social representations, female politicians, Cameroon, stability and change.

Women's participation in politics is low throughout the world – also in Cameroon. The under-representation of women in politics is a hindrance to democracy and gender equality. In this article we examine young Cameroonians' perceptions of women politicians. Our aim is to study the utility of social representations theory in explaining the dynamics of stability and change of people's perceptions. We aim to understand what keeps women outside of politics and whether there is any change on the horizon.

To analyse Cameroonians' perceptions of women politicians from a perspective of change we take social representations theory (SRT) as our theoretical starting point. SRT originates from Serge Moscovici's (1961/2008) seminal work in the reception of psychoanalysis in France. Moscovici (1973) defined social representations as a group of values, conceptions, ideas and practices that have two functions. First, they serve to create order, which enables individuals to act in the physical world and exert control over it. Second, they make communication possible, which makes interaction, naming and categorizing new phenomena easier (Moscovici, 1973). Moscovici (1961/2008) has outlined that the formation of a social representation involves three processes: *anchoring*, *objectification* and *naturalisation*. Anchoring means integrating a new idea into an existing network of meanings, i.e. anchoring classifies and names people, objects and ideas into different categories. The objectification process transforms an abstract idea into something nearly physical and tangible. In objectification, the iconic aspect of an ill-defined idea or entity is discovered in order to bring the concept and the image together. Naturalisation makes an object part of social reality by giving it a life of its own. (Moscovici, 1984.)

As our focus is on societal change, in this article we adopt a dialogical approach to social representations which owes its development in large part to Ivana Marková's work (2003). Dialogicality in social representation emphasises that negotiating a shared understanding of something does not imply the absence of conflict, disagreement, or debate. Instead, social representations are formed and transformed out of these interactions and the meaning(s) of an object, women politicians in this study, often involves dialogical oppositions and inconsistencies.

A large body of research has investigated social representations in relation to anchoring and objectification. With the development of the dialogical approach to social representations, Moscovici (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994) and others have argued that the generative processes of social representations are diverse, and that themata are another way that social representations

can be formed and maintained. Themata are simply very basic, interdependent oppositions in everyday thinking and language such as good and bad, clean and dirty, moral and immoral, private and public. These oppositions become thematised when the meaning of male/female, for example, is expressed in terms of some social position such as gender, religion, or politics and especially during times of crisis, when the meaning of these taxonomies is likely to change. (Marková, 2000.)

The dialogical approach provides theoretical tools that allow us to conceptualise social representations as dynamic structures which encompass power and resistance, stability and change. According to Marková (2003) social knowledge is always about the dynamics of stability and change. Oppositions, disagreements, quarrelling and conflicts always leave a space for exposing different interpretations and potentials for change. Crucial to dialogicality and thinking in oppositions affecting change is not only their existence, but their recognition.

Also Elcheroth et al. (2011) refer to the importance of recognition when they underline the role of metarepresentations in the social change. They argue that social representations are meta-knowledge, which implies that what some people assume to be relevant, others think is part of their own frame of interpretation; and that collective behavior can often be influenced more powerfully at the level of meta-representations than at the level of individual beliefs. In other words, it means that the possibilities for change rely heavily on influencing metarepresentations. Here lies the power of media and institutions such as the educational system.

The social representations theory helps us to understand how new ideas challenge old ones, how they are adjusted, adopted and used, and what new ideas can be used to enhance the change on the one hand and what obstacles to the change exist on the other hand. Our theoretical contributions are twofold: despite the increasing interest in societal change as the core topic of societal psychology (e.g., Howarth et al., 2013), empirical research is still scarce in social representation theory, particularly, in an African context, which we intend to contribute to through our analysis of Cameroonian students conceptions of women in politics. Due to both modern and traditional influences (Sakki et al., 2010), Cameroon provides an interesting context for the analysis of change and stability.

Indeed, most studies of social representations have been undertaken in Western cultures in conditions of modernity. Although Moscovici (1984, pp.12-14) writes about “the era of

representations” by which he refers to social representations as a phenomenon of modern societies in which scientific thinking and new forms of communication are predominately filling the modern mind, he has not claimed that social representations could not exist in traditional societies. The capacity to represent social knowledge exists both in modern and in more traditional societies (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). In fact, many studies show the utility of SRT in the contexts of traditional societies (e.g., Wagner et al, 1999b, 2000; Joffé & Bettega, 2003; Kessi, 2011), where different modes of thinking, traditional and modern, exist side by side. SRT is relevant to the study of contemporary social problems which may explain its popularity among Latin American scholars, where it is seen as a tool for understanding diverse social phenomena important for community, such as democracy, corruption and pollution (de Rosa & Ambrosio, 2008). However, little social representations research has been previously conducted in Africa, and most studies have been dealing with issues related to health and illness (e.g. De-Graft Aikins, 2003 ; Joffé & Bettega, 2003; Kessi, 2011). This research aims to address this need by exploring the social representations of women politicians in an African country – Cameroon.

CAMEROON AND GENDER

Cameroon is a country with over 19 million people, located in central West Africa and bordering Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Nigeria (CIA, 2011). Cameroon became independent in 1960/61¹ and it has two official languages, French and English. Forty per cent of the population are Christians, another 40 per cent practice indigenous traditional beliefs and 20 per cent are Muslim. The country has over 250 ethnic groups (Mbaku, 2005) which offer a wide spectrum of cultural perceptions and gender relations.

In pre-colonial Cameroon, as in some other African countries, one of the main social orders was a dual system: women and men formed complementary organizations, in which both genders managed their own areas of life. In some indigenous Cameroonian communities, women and men formed two parallel, gender-segregated systems that were complementary for economic and social roles (Ngoa, 1975). However, this dual system was not uniform to all regions or to all

¹ French Cameroon achieved independence from France on January 1, 1960, and British [Southern Cameroons](#) merged with it in 1961 to form the [Federal Republic](#) of Cameroon. The formerly French and British regions each maintained substantial [autonomy](#).

ethnic groups (Mbaku, 2005). Most of the dually organized ethnic groups were also patrilineal, giving men the head positions in these communities (Delarozière, 1949). During the colonial era that lasted over seven decades, the dual system was disrupted throughout Cameroon and the continent of Africa. Colonialism placed men in the public sphere and women in the private (Okonjo, 1976). However, in many African communities the meanings given to gender relations are more fluid and ambiguous. Despite the interference of colonialism, many old principles still organise family structures and gender relations. For example, social anthropologist Amadiume (1987) has written about male daughters and female husbands in the village of Nnobi in South Eastern Nigeria. Sociologist Oyewumi Overonke (1997) has talked about non-gendered family organizations where seniority based on relative age, and not on gender, is considered as the most important principle organizing family relations. On a large scale, however, the post-independence era has resulted in an increasing awareness of the oppressed position of women, as well as the need for change (Kassea, 2006). Negofeminism, for example, has emerged as a specific African concept of feminism. It emphasizes the necessity to negotiate gender roles anew (Nnaemeka, 2003).

The Cameroonian Constitution upholds the principle of gender equality. However, there are several legal obstacles to gender equality, such as the complex legal system comprising a mix of the Napoleonic Code and Common Law, and the co-existence of customary written law and local traditions. These and many other social aspects have a negative effect on Cameroonian women (Afrol, 2006; OMCT, 2003). For example, the Cameroonian Civil Code states that the husband is the head of the family and is regarded as the moral and financial manager of the family (CAFEJ, 1996). According to 2011 statistics, 13,9 per cent of parliamentarians were women (25 female parliamentarians and 155 male parliamentarians) (IPU, 2014). Central female political figures were Madame Fonning, (Member of Parliament and entrepreneur), Madame Biya, (President Paul Biyas wife) and Kah Walla (Cameroon People's Party's candidate for presidential elections in 2011). These statistics report a large gender inequality in political participation placing Cameroon as 96th among 146 countries (IPU, 2014).

In a previous study conducted in 2001 on women's societal agency (Sakki, Kassea, Vauhkonen & Pirttilä-Backman, 2010), we conducted several focus group interviews in different parts of Cameroon with women and men living in villages and smaller towns. Our aim was to

examine the social representations of women's roles amongst ordinary Cameroonians...Our focus group interviews clearly showed that a woman's role had the strongest and sometimes only positive content in the family context: a good woman was a good wife and mother and her most important duty was to take care of the family. The core of the traditional representation of a Cameroonian woman was clearly that of being a mother and a wife. In that sense, we could talk about a hegemonic representation (Moscovici, 1988) anchored in the role of motherhood. Nevertheless, we also saw the seeds of emancipating and polemic representations. We found that the education of women was considered important, but it did not have a strong anchor. Its connection to modernization and development was the one that was most evident. Our interviewees often made references to changing customs and to the fact that *things are different now*. Changing customs could therefore be anchored to access to "modern rights". We interpreted the oppositional pair, tradition-modernization, as forming one of the themata that Cameroonian society was anchored in, in the early 2000s. On the other hand, our interview material clearly demonstrated how traditional norms and the post-colonial gender system maintained the prevailing conceptions of women. Most Cameroonian men opposed the idea of women participating in politics and even women considered that the husband's consent was needed because the man was considered to be the head of the family - which is also what the Cameroonian law says. Thus, in the early 2000s, our Cameroonian interviewees held a rather clear picture of traditional women's roles that was based on their own beliefs and experiences from their own surroundings. People had a clear idea of how a woman should behave and any woman not acting according to traditional models was in danger of becoming a "prostitute", which in turn strengthened the images of traditional roles. Moreover, there were not many icons for women politicians whereas male characteristics clearly dominated the image of the prototypic politician: extroverted, rough and corrupted. In other words, in Cameroon, there were no clear conceptions or iconic images of what a new, educated and independent woman could be like, what roles she could have and how her life could be organised.

This study follows the path established in our previous studies in the Cameroonian context (Kassea et al, 2010; Pirttilä-Backman et al, 2004; 2006; 2009), and particularly in our research on social representations of women's roles among Cameroonian villagers in the early 2000s

(Sakki et al., 2010). Ten years later, we intended to analyse women's roles in terms of change and stability. In particular we were interested to examine the ways in which Cameroonians today perceive women in politics. In order to do this, we focused on the young and well-educated Cameroonians as they can be considered as the potential future leaders of the country.

DATA AND METHOD

Both ideological and practical reasons guided the selection of university students as the participants in this study. First, we thought that young and well-educated people are more likely to gain influential positions in future, and thus, they may find political participation as a meaningful topic. Second, we wanted to have as big a sample as possible of male and female participants, both Anglophones and Francophones, interviewed in a rather short timeframe.

Based on the information about the political situation of Cameroon and on the upcoming elections in 2011, we selected certain everyday themes and statements to be discussed in focus groups. We formulated three main themes for these discussions (work and domestic work, decision making and local politics, female politicians and possible change). To further encourage and activate the discussions we formulated some statements (e.g. Women and men are different kind of politicians, Men are better politicians) and showed portraits of female politicians (e.g. Kah Walla; candidate for presidency and Madame Fonning; Member of Parliament).

The focus groups were conducted in May-June 2011 in Buea, Southwest Cameroon. The interviewees were students in different faculties (e.g. business, science and translation) of two universities, the Catholic University of Buea and the University of Buea. We wanted to include students from both major linguistic groups (Anglophone and Francophone) of the country, which was the main reason for the selection of these two universities. Altogether 45 students including 22 females (14 Anglophones/8 Francophone) and 23 males (15 Anglophones/8 Francophones) participated in eight focus group discussions. Participants' age varied between 18 and 42 years. Despite the age differences in a couple of groups, the majority of participants in each group were between 18 and 25 years.

Our focus groups consisted of two Anglophone female groups (5 participants/each), two Anglophone male groups (5 participants/each), one Francophone female group (5 participants) and one Francophone male group (6 participants). We also conducted two focus group

discussions with mixed participants, both male and females (one Francophone group with 3 females and 2 males, one Anglophone group with 4 females and 5 males), as we were curious about the potential negotiations of gender roles between men and women. All focus group discussions were held in English, which was either the first or the second language for all participants. The participants were found through our local contact, a university lecturer. The focus group discussions were held at the campus of the two universities and their length varied from 45 minutes to one and half hours. All discussions were vivid and rich. Sometimes our participants were so passionate about the topic that they talked over each other, which weakened the sound quality of the recording. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and all of them were taped and transcribed. We had the possibility to use a local researcher to assist with the transcripts whenever needed.

A theory-driven qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the talk on female politicians. The analysis was carried out for all the transcribed interview material (233 pages, with single line spacing). The software Atlas-ti was used to automate and to control the coding process and to build categories. In the beginning the focus group material was approached inductively with open-mind following the techniques of the Grounded-Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which the analysis and interpretations are grounded in the data, but at a later stage the procedure was guided by some very basic concepts of social representations theory, such as the definitions of anchors and objectifications (Moscovici, 1984) and themata (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994). In the processes of analysis, the following questions related to these theoretical ideas were asked: How are the female politicians characterised, named and made sense of (anchoring)? Through which symbols, metaphors, figures or personifications are the female politicians made concrete (objectification) (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983; Wagner, et al, 1999)? What generates the talk on female politicians (themata) (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994)?

ANALYSIS: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE POLITICIANS

Complementary and Respect as Generating Themata

All our participants, both men and women, expressed fairly unanimous opinions that anchored women to the domestic sphere. The domestic and marital duties were seen as the main

responsibilities of women. The representation of motherhood dominated all the discussions about female political participation. The social representation of female politicians was constructed around the negotiations of male and female roles and around the power distribution between women and men. In the following extract from a focus group discussion, female and male participants describe women's roles through domestic and marital duties.

Extract 1: Mixed Anglophone group

- 1 *F1: normally Africans have that mindset that women's [place is in*
2 *the kitchen]*
3 *M1: [place is in the kitchen] yes ((laughing))*
4 *M2: -- it is like a kind of believe that a woman is not supposed to*
5 *be there (in politics) something like that (.) --*
6 *M3: women [don't take decisions]*
7 *F2: the [African men take]*
8 *F1: yes the African men take (.) women don't take decision the*
9 *men do everything --*
10 *M1: it comes from our grandfathers their grandfathers their*
11 *F2: ((laughing)) their [grandfathers]*
12 *M2: ((laughing)) [their grandfathers]*
13 *M3: many many years ago --*
14 *M5: I think even the bible is like that*

In the above extract, the construction of female roles through domestic work (lines 1-3) and male roles through decision-making (lines 6-9) places men and women in different positions. These different roles and positions reserved for men and women are legitimized by the reference to *tradition* (lines 10-13) and *religion* (line 14). The African mindset and the bible are powerful rhetorical resources—anchors and objectifications in social representations terminology—used in the justification of women's suppressed position. The domestic and political spheres are

portrayed as mutually exclusive, and thus, the anchoring of women in the domestic sphere excludes them from the political sphere. Male and female roles are not constructed as overlapping but as distinct and complementary. Indeed, when gender roles are framed by the African tradition, the complementary is the thema that generates the representation of genders.

Our analyses indicated that male participants in particular described domestic work and child caring as primarily female duties. Throughout the interview material, male interviewees expressed their worry about political participation threatening women's duties as mothers and wives and risking the wellbeing of children.

Extract 2: Mixed Anglophone group

- 1 *M3: -- but my fear is that having to reconcile family responsibility*
2 *and work is very difficult -- I want to imagine a woman -- in her*
3 *own home as a mother first of all (.) --*
4 *M5: do they ((children)) really have the affection (?)-- they lack*
5 *their mothers affection --*
6 *M6 : because they are in a conference somewhere or --*
7 *F3: -- it is not just female affection (!) the children need also*
8 *fathers affection*
9 *M4: but they need so much more mother*
10 *F3: who said that (?) it's not just women who have to take care of*
11 *the family (!)*
12 *M1: [the] father's role is the paying for the family*
13 *F3: no (!) why (?)*
14 *M1: they are bringing the bread (.) [the breadwinner of the*
15 *family]*
16 *M2: [woman cannot should not must not be the president]*

In the above extract 2, a group of male and female participants discuss the parental roles and their meanings for the wellbeing of children. In the beginning of the extract male participants express their worries and argue that political participation should not keep women from fulfilling their prior duties in the domestic sphere (lines 1-6; 9). A female participant rejects this traditional position and tries to negotiate anew roles for both women and men as parents (lines 7-8, 10-11). The complementarity of gender roles, man as a provider of the family (lines 12, 14) and woman as a mother and a wife, are the dominant arguments used when the women's political participation is resisted, but as one female participant brings forth (line 7), these traditional perceptions based on patrilineal family structures can be challenged.

The role of negotiation in the pursuit of equality has been emphasized by African feminists. For example Obioma Nnaemeka (2003) argues that African women recognize when and how to negotiate gender roles anew and use multiple strategies to negotiate the change to maintain complementarity and mutuality at the same time. While extract 2 illustrates the tension in the formation of social representations of gender roles, female participants go one step further in extract 3 and personify the change in Kah Walla, a female candidate in the 2011 presidential election.

Extract 3: Female Anglophone group 2

- 1 *F4: I will talk about Kah Walla first (.) I really admire her (.) --*
2 *when it comes to politics my uncle is a politician so there is some*
3 *very dirty things -- (.) then this woman taking up this step this*
4 *bold step to stand as -- a contestant for a female president in*
5 *Cameroon is it really a challenge to some other people (.) -- I just*
6 *wish other people should copy -- (.) maybe things can be more*
7 *better if a lady rules us (.) as at least you have the experience in*
8 *men and so on so --*
9 *F1: yeah*
10 *F2: people don't believe in her because if the women themselves*
11 *(.) -- the women occupy a great population in this country (.) --*

- 12 *leaving the men aside if women themselves believe then Kah*
13 *Walla is going to make it in this country*
14 *F1: [maybe yeah!]*
15 *F4: [well in] my opinion -- (.) everything begins in a day in a*
16 *moment by one person and so if Kah Walla eventually or any*
17 *other lady eventually takes the lead and successfully gets there I*
18 *believe it will show to other female Cameroonians to believe that*
19 *they can equally do it (.) and so I really pray that any lady from*
20 *now on should get to the level of even a prime minister*
21 *presidency and other women will probably follow --*
22 *F3: everybody is interested in it and they want someone [to*
23 *begin]*
24 *F1: [just needs someone to begin] ((others agree))*

Extract 3 demonstrates the importance of positive icons, or objectifications in social representations terminology, of women politicians for the construction of a social representation of female politicians. Kah Walla is portrayed as a forerunner and an inspiration to other women. These female participants express their hope that female political participation will increase if women get positive role models in the political sphere (lines 15-24). They also argue that female political participation may lead to a better politics and to positive changes for all (lines 6-7).

The change in gender roles was not described as desirable by all of our interviewees. Male participants in particular expressed worries about losing respect if there were to be a change in the gender relations.

Extract 4: Male Anglophone group 2

- 1 *M4: you see Africans have different mentality the first thing we*
2 *fail to understand ((others nodding)) (.) an African woman as*
3 *soon as she gets something greater than the man it becomes hell*
4 *for the man*
5 *M: yes ((others agree))*
6 *M4: the woman will not give you respect you as a man*
7 *M3: in decision making (.) - -*
8 *M2: your post in the house is going to like wage by (.) -- so when*
9 *we depend on her she would want to take the post of the man*
10 *((laughing))*
11 *M1: and the man the post of the woman*
12 *M4: the man would be babysitting*

In the above extract 4, a group of male participants underline the importance of respect as a principal organizer of gender relations (line 6). A woman in political power is described as *hell* (lines 3-4). A change in gender roles is interpreted as threat to the respect of men (see also extract 12). The male participant uses *African mentality* as a rhetorical resource to argue against women's political participation (lines 1-2). Extract 4 also illustrates the dynamics of the complementarity of gender roles; a change in female roles leads to a change in male roles (lines 8-12). It becomes clear that women's political participation does not only problematize women's respect towards men but also towards motherhood and womanhood in general. It is feared to cause dramatic changes in parenting and family relations more generally.

The issue of respect seems to depend on the complementarity in gender relations. If this complementarity is challenged, the *mutual respect* between men and women is lost. Indeed, according to our participants, this idea of mutual respect seems to be an important theme that

organizes male-female relations in Cameroonian society. At the same time, respect sets new challenges for the negotiation of gender equality.

According to our analyses, not many of our interviewees saw the possibility of women having a double role, one as a mother and another as a politician (see extract 14). However, sometimes social realities change faster than perceptions. In the present-day Cameroon the proportion of women in politics has quickly increased. Despite the increase of potential role models, the prototypical female role, anchored in motherhood, was used to define women in the political sphere as becomes clear in the following extracts 5 and 6.

Extract 5: Female Francophone group 1

- 1 *F3: -- yes there are lot of borders that they have to [face] --*
2 *((others nodding))*
3 *F1: I think they are servants*
4 *F2: yes as politicians*

Extract 6: Male Anglophone group 1

- 1 *M4: active role (?) actually they ((women)) play the minor role*
2 *because the men play the major role*
3 *Mod: and why is it that they are on the side role (?)*
4 *M1: because we are being ruled by a man first ((laughing))*
5 *M3: God is a man ((group laughing)) --*
6 *M1: our country is being ruled by a man (.) his excellency*
7 *President Paul Biya (.) for this reason we believe so much in men*
8 *here in Africa*

In extracts 5 and 6, both male and female participants argue that female politicians have an assistant, a servant role in the political sphere. Extracts 5 and 6 illustrate that the role expectations of women as mothers and wives in the domestic sphere follow them into political sphere even though the two spheres, domestic and political, are seen as exclusive. In extract 6, both the God (line 5) and the leader of the country, President Biya (line 7) are personified as men. These *male icons* are used as rhetorical resources to justify men's unquestioned higher position in society. Male participants construct a passive, supporting role for female politicians to complement men's active and dominating role (lines 1-2). The role given to a female politician serves to preserve the complementarity of gender roles also in the political sphere. The supporting role of female politicians maintains the social order and stability.

In other words, the traditional representations of gender roles also defined the social representation of female politicians. The possible skills of female politicians were linked to the domestic sphere as becomes apparent in the following extract 7.

Extract 7: Francophone Mixed group

- 1 *F3: I am saying that in the government women occupy -- a social*
2 *position (.) like the minister of [education]*
3 *F1: [education]*
4 *M1: [education] public health*
5 *F3: public health those things (.) but men minister of finance -- (.)*
6 *they ((men)) just focus on money and on everything which*
7 *concern [foreign issues] --*
8 *M2: [yes] ((group nodding)) --*
9 *M1: [- - man as president and then they can give social positions]*
10 *like minister of health minister of education -- yes those*

Both male and female participants place the women politicians into the sphere of social politics as it appears as a political field where women can use their motherly nature as caregivers. The

social representation of women in politics is constructed by using the same traits and qualities that define women in the domestic sphere. The above extract 7 demonstrates that the representation of female politicians allows female participation in the fields of education and health (lines 1-5), while finance, trade and foreign politics are excluded areas (lines 5-8). Again the female and male roles are negotiated as complementary. In these negotiations female politicians are offered a position of assisting male politicians in the field of social policies (see extracts 5, 6 and 7). For our participants, female political participation is an understandable option as long as women are anchored to the domestic sphere.

Social Representations of Female Politicians in Context

Real world social phenomena, including women's participation in politics and the societal change "can only be properly understood if they are seen as being embedded in historical, cultural and macro-social conditions" (Wagner et al., 1999). As the task of societal psychology is to explore how the context shapes the ways in which societal change is understood, supported or resisted (Howarth et al., 2013), we analysed social representations of women politicians in context. Our analyses show that the representations of female politicians are constructed in three different contexts: historical, cultural and socio-political. These representations are constructed and construct themselves within these frames.

In the *historical context*, female politicians were made sense of in reference to the country's colonial history and shaped by the dependent and disadvantageous ties with France, which date back to the days of French colonialism. The social representation of female politicians was framed by the international politics. Our participants described the international position of Cameroon as weak, dependent and subordinate, and improving the country's position in global politics and trade was considered as the main task of a politician. Within this context, female politicians were described as soft and weak:

Extract 8: Anglophone male group 2

- 1 *M 1: normally women are soft -- and when it concerns transitions*
- 2 *like standing out to separate the country from colonial master or*
- 3 *something it is like will she be able to do that (?) but if she can I*
- 4 *have no problem with that -- ((others nodding))*

In the above extract 8, a group of male participants describe women as soft. This softness is normalized as a common and shared character for all women (line 1). It also contests women's ability to fight for independence. Women's "nature" is used as a sufficient argument to question women's place in politics. Although one male participant also expresses positive attitudes towards female politicians (lines 3-4), the contradiction between the softness attributed to women and toughness attributed to colonial politics allows using women's nature as an argument to resist women's political participation.

In the *cultural context* female politicians are anchored to a Cameroonian mindset. Tribalism and corruption are the main contents given to this context. In other words, corruption is the most central character of political life in Cameroon. It was brought up in all focus group discussions and it can be said to define Cameroon's cultural context:

Extract 9: Mixed Anglophone group

- 1 M4: that is eating Cameroonians [corruption]
- 2 M1: [yeah corruption]
- 3 M4: that is one of the main problem --
- 4 M5: every step of [the]
- 5 M4: [every] human being every animal every Cameroonian
- 6 M2: is corrupted -- ((others nodding))
- 7 F2: everybody is corrupt (!!)) --
- 8 M1: -- right now if anyone enters politics maybe there are some
- 9 things that have been told to -- her -- she can easily be

- 10 manipulated (.) -- before this present generation the rulers have
11 gone there can be no change

In the above extract 9, a group of male and female participants describe the meaning of corruption. It is seen to define all practices in every level of governance and mentioned as one of the major problems in Cameroon. Corruption becomes an essential part of the cultural context when it is described to define all Cameroonians. It has a negative effect on politics in general and on female politicians in particular. Because, as a male participant explains, female politicians can be easily manipulated, they are powerless to resist the corrupted practices of the present government (lines 9-10).

In the *socio-political context* female politicians were discussed in reference to topical socio-political phenomena and societal change. The Middle East uprisings in particular provided an anchor for this discussion. During the data gathering in spring 2011, the social context was characterized by the political unrest, but also by hopes of change. Also, female politicians were discussed within this context:

Extract 10: Male Anglophone group 1

- 1 M1: just take the case of Egypt ((laughing)) although the man
2 gave up after about two weeks of rioting if there was a woman
3 just about the third day
4 M4: a good example is Gaddafi till now--
5 M5: he has had enough --
6 M4: and his wife she must have given up --
7 M3: --look at the situation in Libya (.) Libya is fighting a war (.)

- 8 but they have made a stand (.) they have given a mark they can
9 also stand against the best in the world (.) that is a hard decision
10 women cannot take (.) she would just leave and say they just
11 take away the country (.)

In the above extract 10, a group of male participants describe the problems of female political participation in the light of Middle East uprisings in terms of weakness and softness (lines 2-3, 6, 9-10). Female politicians are portrayed as incompetent to defend independence, protect sovereignty or rule a nation in a situation of war or crisis. Male participants personify Mubarak's and Gadhafi's defeat to their wives' weakness and express their preference for a strong male leader. As has been brought up previously (see extracts 5 & 6) an ideal kind of women politician is characterized as an assistant of male leaders rather than in a position of an active decision-maker. Extract 10 illustrates how *the threat of conflict* can be used as a rhetorical resource to resist women's political participation.

Taken together, historical, cultural and socio-political contexts created an atmosphere of dependency, inferiority and instability limiting the potential agency of female politicians in two ways. First, women's skills and abilities to lead a country like Cameroon were questioned. Our participants emphasized the differences between developing and developed countries (see extract 12) and positioned the female politicians in a context of developed countries that already have a high standard of living and a well-functioning political system. The stable and peaceful conditions were described as a prerequisite for female political participation. Second, female politicians were considered as an obstacle for development as such, because women in politics were seen to cause political unrest and conflicts:

Extract 11: Male Anglophone group 1

1 M2: if a woman is at the helm of politics in Cameroon there
2 would be a lot of disagreement in the country (.) because the
3 guys see themselves as being above the women in the African
4 context (.) we see ourselves like ruling the women so -- I don't
5 think any guy would be willing to join or be involved in any
6 decisions in the government (.) the guys would be totally angry
7 and this can lead to division in country (.) so I think the women
8 should remain only there making the mild decisions and the men
9 make the major decisions (.)

In the above extract 11, a male interviewee describes the female politicians as a source of conflict and political chaos (line 2). He describes the frustration and aggression that would be felt by male citizens if they were ruled by a woman. *Patriarchal structure* (line 2) and *African context* (lines 3-4) are used as rhetorical resources that legitimize women's suppressed position in the political sphere. Again, female politicians are seen as a threat to society, because they question the principles of complementarity and respect, which organize gender relations. As we have discussed previously, female politicians are again positioned as assistants to male politicians (see extracts 4 and 5). The above extract 11 illustrates how the fear of conflict can be used as an argument to resist female political participation.

Besides female political participation, other forms of women's active participation outside the domestic sphere were also described as threatening:

Extract 12 : Male Anglophone group 2

1 M3: --that has come to Africa now where every woman wants to
2 fight (.) women empowerment (.) -- it has caused lot of
3 destruction in Africa (.) yeah coming back to the eight of March
4 which is women's day it has really caused a lot of destruction in
5 Africa -- on that day -- some of them they go drinking and
6 behaving real crazy (.) and some of them who go walking naked
7 on the streets and -- some of them force their husbands to the
8 kitchen actually forcing not mediating with them (.) under
9 normal circumstances the Africans say that's quite wrong but
10 they go on saying this is my day (.) okay all women
11 empowerment stuff has brought a lot of problems to Africa to
12 Cameroon because now it's like a battle (.) but if women knew
13 their position and had confidence in themselves like someone
14 said they will not be fighting for it but they will just do what they
think they have to do

In the above extract 12, a group of male participants discuss women's empowerment in Cameroon. It is characterized as a destructive fight against men (lines 3-8) and it is objectified in the International Women's Day (lines 3-4) that is used as a concrete, negative example of the causes of women's empowerment. The extract illustrates how the same expressions can be used to describe female political participation and conflicts and war (problem, battle, fight). This analogy allows constructing an image of threat of a divided country and an image of a war between men and women. Again, *conflict* is used as a rhetorical resource to resist women's political participation.

DISCUSSION: WOMEN IN POLITICS THROUGH LENSES OF SRT

In the light of a dialogical approach to social representations, women's and men's roles can be seen as culturally shared antinomies or oppositions (Marková, 2003, s. xvii), which become thematized and problematized by the idea of women in politics. Our analyses have shown that in

the Cameroonian context women's political participation challenges some self-evident antinomies such as men/women, tradition/modern, domestic/politics, leader/follower and public/private. Our analyses demonstrated that the discourse about female politicians was characterized by the tension between stability and change. We identified several rhetorical resources – anchors and objectifications – such as African context, tradition, religion, male icons and the threat of conflict, which were used to maintain the stability.

In the above analysis, we have seen that the social representation of female politicians is characterized by the dialogicality and ambivalence. The antinomies we found were interdependent - a change in women's roles was seen to cause a change in men's roles as well. Thus, women's and men's roles as culturally shared antinomies generated different, opposite sources of respect and of social approval for women and men, such as political/domestic and public/private. According to our interviewees, complementary in gender relations presumed that men respect the role of women as mothers and wives, and correspondingly, women respect the role of men as providers and decision makers. Thus, we argue that the complementarity and the respect are the main themata in Cameroonian society that maintain the stability of gender roles and do not allow the social representation of female politicians to develop.

Therefore, it seems that women's political participation is possible only if gender roles are negotiated anew both in the political and in the domestic sphere. On the one hand, we saw some seeds of change, when female participants challenged the self-evident roles in the family and demanded a more active role for men in parenting. On the other hand, our male focus groups clearly differed from other focus groups as they saw women's empowerment in a more negative light. They did not express any interest in negotiating gender roles anew and described the male position as threatened if women were to gain political power. However, these findings can be considered as a global phenomenon. Gender inequality exists as a social, economic, and political reality in most societies, as has been recently discussed in a special issue focusing on “working with men on gender equality” in *Gender and Development* (2013, vol 21). The reasons for male resistance against women's empowerment may be many, but one explanation could be found in men's fear of failing to live up to the ideals of masculinity. The stereotypes of masculine power and success demand them to be family heads and leaders of wider society (e.g., Sweetman, 2013). Thus, the empowerment of women in the global South can also have an unplanned

negative impact on women when gender norms are thrown into crisis by economic realities shifting and challenging the roles of women and men in marriage and the family (e.g., Lwambo, 2013).

The arguments used against female political participation were quite similar to those found in our previous studies (Sakki et al., 2010). The main arguments included worries of children's wellbeing, of the loss of respect and male status, and the unsuitability of female "nature" in politics. Unlike in the previous studies, we analysed the representations of female politicians in contexts which allowed us to see how historical, cultural and socio-political contexts framed the representations of female politicians and constrained the possibilities for change. All our focus groups emphasized the difference between developing and developed countries and reflected the potential of women to engage in the development of the country. On the one hand, women politicians were described as emotional and weak, on the other hand they were considered as a possible source of conflict and political unrest. Most importantly, the corruption of Cameroonian society and the atmosphere of conflict framed and impeded women's political agency. Female political participation and gender roles seemed to be salient and meaningful topics for Cameroonian students, but no change was perceived as possible before the country had developed to a certain standard first.

Nevertheless, these interpretations should be considered as tentative as there are many limitations in our study. One limitation is that our sample does not represent the whole ethnic spectrum of Cameroon. Our sample represents young, educated people who all study in one part of the country. The use of English language in our interviews is another possible limitation because it may have led to the invisibility of more fluid and ambiguous gender categories that are found among some ethnic groups in the Western Africa (e.g., Oyewumi, 1997). Also, some of the statements we used to activate the focus group discussions (such as "men are better politicians") may have directed or even provoked the participants to exaggerate the differences between the two genders. Moreover, we should not forget the role played by the interviewer, a western female researcher, who may not have been able to follow all the nuances of discussions, but whose presence has most likely eased the atmosphere and made the participants feel more need to explain their perspectives to 'an outsider'. And as last but not least, it is likely that as western researchers we cannot get entirely rid of our western-based conceptions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If we turn our attention to Cameroon as a social context we find there some obstacles that are difficult to overcome in a short time span. The political life of Cameroon is a rough playground, with many risks for everyone entering it, especially as corruption is pervasive (Kengne Taalah, 2007; Sindjoun, 2004). It is not only important to bring into public light examples of women who are in politics, and who have a high esteem in their communities, but also to change the way in which politics are conducted in the country. As our focus group participants expressed, corruption keeps women outside of politics.

In the light of our interview material it does not seem possible to include the two roles of woman, as a good wife and as a politician, under the same social representation of women. When making new public images, it may be important to indicate in a concrete way how women can be good wives and politicians at the same time, with due division of domestic workload within the family and/or help. Our participants mentioned Kah Walla as a forerunner for women in politics, but more icons are needed. Perhaps, most importantly, legal reform is needed as the law, which places man as the family head, does not support new images of women that need to be build.

In this article we have intended to give voice to young people of a non-western country – often under-represented in the social research. Our aim was to explore the utility of SRT in such a context. The key concepts of this theory, such as anchoring, objectification and themata, seemed to be usable tools to analyse how Cameroonian students make sense of women in politics. Along with Howarth (2006) who has argued that social representations theory should be understood as a critical theory that is fundamentally about the “battle of ideas” (Moscovici, 1998, p.403), the analysis of the representations of female politicians held by the potential future leaders of the country allowed to not only see how representations of female politicians were constructed but also how these representations were used to maintain stability and traditional gender roles on the one hand, and to contest them, on the other hand. These kinds of questions are important to address as the representations of female politicians are directly related to such real world social phenomena as women’s possibilities for agency, equality and democracy.

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APPENDIX 1: Transcription signs

(!) exclamation

(?) a higher intonation in the end of comment

[word] short talk out of turn or a short comment between speech

-- deleted conversation

(.) pause

((word)) transcriber's comment

((--)) speech unclear

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