

The Impact of Gender and Development Projects on Family Configurations in the Northern Zone of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Family structures are gradually changing. This evolution is gaining momentum with globalization and development. In the northern zone of Cameroon, many development projects are implemented there with the aim of ensuring the prevention, protection and social care of communities. However, they constitute at the same time a weakening/destabilization of families. This contribution aims to analyze the impact of gender-related projects on family configurations in the northern zone of Cameroon. This study being essentially qualitative, takes into account ethnographic and documentary data. Based on the dynamic sociology of George Balandier, it starts from the hypothesis that gender projects implemented with a view of guaranteeing social development appear rather as a disturbing element in families because the ideologies conveyed by these projects do not converge with African customs and practices. The findings show how old family practices, considered normal, are perceived today with the advent of gender-related projects as violence or coercive practices. These ideologies modify and transform current family configurations. This study contributes to the understanding of the direct and indirect effects of globalization on African families.

Keywords: Development Project, Family, Gender, Ideologies, Northern Zone.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The sociology of the family studies the behavior of individuals who live in the same space and are united by an emotional bond or kinship. It starts from the premise that the family is not a given but a construct. It varies historically from one era to another and geographically from one region to another. There is therefore a perpetual social change in the basic structure as a result of globalization. The effects of globalization being varied, affect almost all areas of life and the whole world. We will focus on the impact of gender-based development projects at the level of African families in general and in the northern zone of Cameroon in particular. The northern zone hosts several development projects for various reasons: the level of insecurity of the populations linked to the abuses of the Islamist sect Boko Haram in the Far North region (Bana Barka, 2018); the massive displacement of populations on Cameroonian territory (Adamaoua and East) following the climate of insecurity that prevails in the North and West of the Central African Republic (Premiere Urgence, 2008); the concern to guarantee community development through the gender component. These different causes of insecurity explain the urgency of humanitarian interventions in this part of the country. Projects being a means of improving the living conditions of populations, are used as a channel to convey gender ideologies in a given community. These ideologies, generally advocating gender equality and the empowerment of women, are claimed to be essential for achieving sustainable, equitable and people-centered development (Bereni *et al.*, 2012). These gender development initiatives undertaken in these areas are perceived differently by the communities. Despite their plan to improve the socio-economic living conditions of the populations, they would also cause community and family upheaval. The scientific significance of this article can be appreciated in the fact that it offers, through qualitative research, an explanation for the weakening/destabilizing of family structures in the light of gender and development projects in northern Cameroon. The study shows that in family structures in Africa, several elements are at the origin of changes from gender and development projects. We have among other things: the inversion of roles between men and women, the emancipation of women and young girls, resistance to certain cultural facts. These different points create frustration within families and destabilize them. Globalization, which is a planetary and multidimensional phenomenon and which affects all areas of life, is transforming Africa from a traditional society characterized by solidarity, conservation, to a modern society characterized by

individualism. However, the methodology used in the context of this reflection is based on an essentially qualitative approach because it focuses on the life stories and perceptions of the actors. It is based from the outset on the corpus of secondary data compiled from documentary research. The survey was made up of a sample of five (5) gender and development projects implemented in the following localities: Lagdo, Pitoa, Djohong, Meiganga Waza, Godola. These areas are distributed in the three (3) northern regions. Thus, we reached out to the direct and indirect beneficiaries of these projects to gather their opinion on the impact of the gender project in their lives. Twenty people were interviewed on this issue, including 15 (fifteen) women and 5 (five) men, randomly targeted. It is therefore necessary to show that these ideologies are more or less beneficial for Africa. They constitute an upheaval in the initial structure of families and at the same time they reinforce community living together. This work is therefore based on two (2) essential points. Let us note on the one hand the theoretical framework, on the other hand, the results obtained following our investigations. These results include, among other things, the logic of gender and development projects, the upheavals and contributions generated by gender and development projects in the northern zone from the point of view of local communities.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To carry out our reflection on the impact of globalization on family configurations, we opted for the dynamic sociology theory of George Balandier. In his fundamental work, *Meaning and Power, social dynamics* (1971), he tries to destroy the myth of societies without history and to identify the social dynamics of primitive societies. He is one of the first to focus his attention on traditional societies, as well as on the changes taking place in contemporary African societies. He is captivated by modern urban Africa while the others are mainly interested in rural societies. He is committed to studying the dynamics of underdevelopment both in Africa and in the world. It is a question of restoring to these types of societies a permanent dynamic. The current orientations of dynamist sociology are perceived in the direction of a multilinear analysis. In this conception, the notion of progress is redefined. It is no longer continuous, necessary and repetitive. There are dynamic elements within every society. As such, the development or the transformation is only the work of the dynamic elements which exist inside the structure concerned, what George Balandier in his work calls "dynamics of the interior". However, the elements that come from outside can modify, slow down or stifle internal energies. This is the "outside dynamic". Three postulates are to be considered in Balandier's approach. Note: dependent societies are affected by their relations with societies external to them, and this at the level of their social, political, cultural and economic structures; These societies must therefore be analyzed after identifying the "dynamism from within" and "dynamism from without" and must also be taken into account.

Therefore, the theory of social dynamics helps us to understand family dynamics in the northern zone from gender and development projects. Families are therefore part of a new dynamism, this is how we are witnessing transformations that come from outside and constitute a "dynamic from outside". From this perspective, the family is perceived as an entity, a social fact in perpetual motion.

III. MATH RESULTS

A. Logic of Gender and Development Projects

Gender and development projects have various logics that they convey and tend to instill in their target communities. These projects advocating gender equality between men and women, therefore aim to limit all forms of inequalities identified during the implementation of the project. In the lines that follow, we further substantiate these gender ideologies.

"Gender", "gender studies", "gender approach" are sometimes ambiguous notions. Transposed from the English "Gender", gender is a sociological concept designating "social gender relations" and, in concrete terms, the analysis of status, social role, relations between men and women in a given society. Applied to public policies, the objective of gender analysis or perspective is to promote the equality of women and men by taking into account the socially constructed differences and hierarchy, which produce inequalities. In the target communities, there are several prejudices and social constructions on gender, namely: "women do not have the right to speak in front of an assembly of men; the woman's place is in the kitchen; the man has the last word on all household decisions as long as he lives, on his death it is one of his brothers or a family member (male) who takes over; women have no right to inheritance..." (Comment collected during a focus group carried out with members of the "GIC neem-karité" in Rabinga in northern Cameroon in August 2020. The gender approach starts from the observation that inequalities between women and men are constructed by societies. These inequalities result from masculine and feminine roles assigned on the basis of biological differences. The gender approach calls into question the processes of hierarchization of individuals according to their sex and the resulting discrimination.

Gender ideologies advocate that no development can be envisaged without the integration and empowerment of women who very often constitute a significant segment of the population in the political, economic, social and cultural fields. Development is understood as all technical, social, territorial and demographic transformations. Before being a matter of world politics, aid and economic investment, technical and cultural progress, Jean Copans emphasizes that “development is explained by the role of social structures, categories, groups, classes, genders and individuals, actors of development, of the social conditions of the exercise of power and of economic production” (Pirrote, 2011). However, according to the United Nations in the article Women's Rights are Human Rights, states that there are laws that allow women, men, boys and girls: to enjoy the same opportunities, the same rights and obligations in all spheres of daily life and to have equal access to education; gain financial independence, share family responsibilities; to be free from all forms of coercion, intimidation and violence; to be able to make decisions that will have a positive impact on their health and safety and that of their families.

The implementation of gender projects in a given locality takes into account very specific objectives. However, limiting/reducing all forms of violence against women, men and children is one of the objectives. These forms of violence are classified as follows: rape, sexual assault, early/forced marriage, physical violence, emotional violence, denial of resources and opportunities (Institut National de la Statistique, 2020). Cameroon adheres to the definition of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) adopted by the United Nations, namely: "any violence that is exerted on a woman or a man simply because she is a woman or because 'he is a man' (Institut National de la Statistique, 2020). It therefore addresses a person on the basis of their gender or sex and includes acts which inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, coercion and other deprivations of liberty whether in public life or in private life.

There are many concepts related to the issue of gender. Note among others:

Equality which would mean that men and women enjoy equal treatment under law and policy and have equal access to resources and services within the family, their community and society as a whole.

Equity, on the other hand, refers to a fair and equitable distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men. It often involves the implementation of policies and programs targeted at women to eliminate existing inequalities.

Gender-based discrimination is any distinction, exclusion and restriction based on socially constructed roles and norms that prevents a person from fully enjoying their human rights.

Inequality refers to a misunderstanding of the efforts and rights of women in development.

The invisibility of women, in the sense of Droy (1990) in her work entitled Women and Rural Development, is perceived as the non-recognition of women's work in development and the glaring differences and gaps between women and people in all areas of life.

These terms are imperatively taken into account and defended in the jargon of gender and development projects. It is in this sense that a development actor expresses himself in these terms:

The primary goal of gender and development projects commonly called: project to fight against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is to bring the community of this region, of course that of North Cameroon, to equal treatment under the rules and laws. set by the Cameroonian government. This is a heavy task for us development agent given the realities of this area. However, we strive to make this possible. This is our mission (Interview conducted with a Plan For Girls agent in Lagdo in North Cameroon in September 2021).

As a result, the analysis is focused on very specific projects implemented in the localities of the northern zone of Cameroon. These are: the gender project implemented by Care International in the Far North of Cameroon; the gender impact project as part of the rehabilitation of the Maroua-Mora-Waza-Kousseri road implemented by the NGO RIDEV (Research Institute for Development); the support project for women and young girls of the organization Plan for Girls (P4G) in the department of Bénoué (Northern Cameroon); the training project for women in Lagdo on strategies to combat GBV with the humanitarian association Youth Care Network and finally the child protection project with the NGO LWF (Lutheran World Federation) in Adamaoua.

B. Gender Projects and Upheavals in Family Configurations in the Northern Zone of Cameroon

It is up to us in this part to highlight the forms of upheavals that gender and development projects have generated in the northern zone of Cameroon. Among other things, we note: the reversal of roles with regard to decision-making in families, the redefinition of household chores between girls and boys/women and men, a new conception of the approach to child marriage.

It should be noted that in the context of this work, we consider family configurations as all entities/organizations bringing together people from the same family relationship or not, belonging to the same ancestor or not, sharing the same roof or not. and living under the authority of a head of family or not. The family in the context of this work is perceived in the broad sense of the term. It is even understood as an interaction between individuals within a given society. However, addressing the issue of the impact of gender projects on family structures amounts to dismantling the various changes engendered since the advent of these projects in the northern zone of Cameroon.

Through the implementation of gender projects, we observe changes in decision-making between men and women, girls and boys within households and at the community level. It has been noted that before, women participated little in decisions concerning the household (health care, major household purchases, schooling of children, visits to parents, etc.). A member of the community makes a relevant statement in this regard: “Roles and tasks were well defined since the time of our ancestors” (Comment by a resident of Djohong in Adamaoua Cameroon, collected during a survey fieldwork with LWF in 2020). Gender projects lead to role reversals these days. Decisions are no longer a man's business but also a woman's business.

The presence of international NGOs in our localities has modified several traditional values in the sense that these organizations advocate the independence of women and girls. They implement all the strategies and means necessary to achieve their objectives. Awareness-raising activities on gender-related themes are implemented for this purpose. These women are also supported with income-generating activities (Comment by a resident of Tokombéré in the Far North of Cameroon collected during a Gender impact survey with Care International in 2018).

The author Bilampoa Gnoumou Thiombiano supports the thesis, in one of his works (BilampoaGnoumouThiombiano, 2014), according to which the progressive participation of women in the labor market contributes to the modification of gender relations within couples and, in general, to the improvement of the social status of women. Gender and development projects advocating gender equality, balance in the performance of household chores, create visible changes at the community level, such as the differentiation/classification of tasks between men and women or boys and girls. These projects encourage a mix of tasks between men and women, boys and girls, which was not the case in the old era when the division of labor was valued. These transformations result from the “outside dynamics” of which George Balandier speaks because they come from outside and can modify, slow down or stifle internal energies. The NGO RIDEV, which was recruited as part of the rehabilitation project for National Road No. 1 Maroua-Mora-Dabanga-Kousseri, is involved in the social component through GBV (Gender-Based Violence) activities. He is responsible for playing an intermediary role between the populations living along the corridor and the companies providing the technical aspect of the road. It has organized activities including sensitization and capacity-building sessions on gender issues. To achieve these objectives of reducing/limiting gender-based violence, RIDEV has deployed teams in the field to carry out various activities such as: awareness-raising, field surveys, management of GBV cases, etc. This organization faced enormous difficulties on the ground, because the populations occupying the corridor on which it intervened were very conservative. This collection of interviews demonstrates this to us: “We, Kanouri peoples, hold nothing dearer than our tradition and culture. No one person has a monopoly on transforming it. All forms of violations of this tradition are considered Haram (Term designating all that is prohibited by Islam)” (Interview carried out in the locality of Kangaleri in Far North Cameroon in February 2020). The acquisition of land or a house was once prohibited for African women in general and Sahelian women in particular. The latter complied with this law without any resistance. But nowadays, with the gender approach adopted by development projects, we qualify this act of Gender-Based Violence characterized as “denial of opportunities to women”. The man, according to tradition, had the duty to correct his wife through all forms of punishment. He sometimes found that whipping was the best way and would easily straighten out his wife in order to bring about family cohesion. We see quite the opposite these days with the implementation of gender projects where women are rather challenged to denounce all forms of violence and prejudice against them. This so-called physical and emotional violence are governed by framework laws that condemn the people who commit them. In the Toupouri and Massa countries, for example, the woman sometimes rejoiced and liked to be hit by her spouse. With globalization today, this is considered a criminal act that deserves condemnation.

Marriage after the age of 18 as recommended by human rights is a “burden” for African families. The latter are constrained by this law. Gender and development projects initiated in localities prosecute families who do not respect the established rules which stipulate that anyone under the age of 18 is considered a child. And the latter must fully enjoy his rights.

Legislative provisions (for example on age at marriage) may have a far greater impact on reproduction than many development programs, even though they are not part of the same field of intervention. In Africa, very few development programs (even those that focus primarily on women) take into consideration the reproductive role of women as such. Only the action of family planning organizations is strongly attached to it, even exclusively and in its physical “reproduction” facet. Locoh (2007) adds that “Development projects have counter-intuitive effects because they affect women: positively and negatively, intentionally or not(...)”.

African social configurations show that the family is undergoing changes that transform it on all levels. The impacts of gender and development projects are therefore measured from several angles. François de Singly (2014) deals with the contemporary family in one of these books where he seeks to understand the changes that have taken place within the family group in order to arrive at the so-called modern family.

For his research, this professor d'université is based on numerous authors who have previously worked on the theme of the family, in particular Emile Durkheim, to whom he refers in the introduction to his book.

de Singly (2014) therefore analyzes the characteristics of African families through the principles around the choice of spouse, which for him ensured stability as well as cohabitation and social control. According to him, these principles developed a kind of influence of the elders on the young. African societies, which were not immutable for all that, were marked by family forms that generally depended on the traditions of different peoples (de Singly, 2014).

C. Gender Project and Improvement of the Living Conditions of Local Communities in the Northern Zone of Cameroon

Although gender and development projects cause upheavals within African families, there are nevertheless some direct contributions/effects on local communities. We demonstrate in this part how the projects have promoted the empowerment of women and their visibility in certain sectors of public life.

The gender and development projects that have initiated community empowerment components through support for Income Generating Activities (IGA) have been able to contribute to reducing the problems of food insecurity in certain families: "Thanks to the project to fight against GBV in our community, we have benefited from IGA support and many other donations to meet our vital needs" (Comment collected during an interview with a beneficiary of the Plan for Girls project in August, 2022). It can therefore be seen that, according to the surveys carried out, gender and development projects are also beneficial to local communities in northern Cameroon. The implementation of gender projects has improved the situation of women in certain communities in the sense that multifaceted support from these projects is generally directed towards women. The latter are considered marginalized beings and more vulnerable than men. The World Bank (2001), in its document "Gender inequality across the developing world", highlights three major sources of gender inequality in the world: rights, resources and participation. In its report on development in the world in 2003, the same institution points out that women are poorer than men (70% of the poor are women), that they have more health problems, that they have less resources (properties, access to land, credit, etc.), that they generally have fewer rights and are less represented in decision-making places (less than 10% of seats in parliaments and ministerial posts). Because of these observed gaps, gender and development projects prioritize women in their initiatives and this sometimes makes them smile.

In some localities, gender and development projects have been able to change the mentality of communities. The parents had a way of thinking that went against gender logic. These comments collected during our field surveys explain the perception of parents:

The realities are different depending on what you experience in the village or in the city. The girls in the village before the age of 18 are generally idle because they have not been able to push their studies very far. Instead of taking the risk of seeing them conceive while still with the parents, we prefer to send them in marriage before the age of 18; we cannot do otherwise (Interview carried out with a parent beneficiary of the gender project in Gambarou in the Far North of Cameroon in October 2020).

Over time, after the intervention of gender and development projects, some members of the community were able to get rid of prejudices about marriage and the schooling of young girls.

IV. CONCLUSION

All in all, this reflection dealing with the impact of gender and development projects on family configurations, has made it possible to appreciate the major social dynamics in the current context. Thus, we worked on the basis of the hypothesis that the gender projects implemented, with a view to guaranteeing social development, appear as a disturbing element of families, since the ideologies conveyed by these projects do not converge with the African mores and customs. We have analyzed this hypothesis by examining, on the one hand, the logic of gender and development projects, and on the other hand, the upheavals they cause in the northern zone. We ended by noting the positive impact of these projects from the point of view of local communities. It mainly emerges from this reflection that the gender and development projects implemented in the northern zone of Cameroon more or less guarantee the socio-economic development of the communities, because they transform the mores / habits and customs while weakening the African families on the one hand and at the same time strengthens the socio-economic situation of local populations. Thus, this work is crucial in the sense that it has allowed us to examine the contours of development aid which seems to be beneficial for communities but constraining or even hidden. This work has also made it possible to shed light on the logics of gender which seem very "rough", and which weaken African habits and customs. Finally, this study aims to open other avenues of research such as: Female domination in the era of gender projects, the impact of female empowerment in the light of gender projects, etc.

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