

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: strategies to enable women's participation in decision making.**

The issue of Women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of agenda's across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures especially developing countries. The disparity is more alarming and rampant in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world Countries as compared to the developed world.

The movement to emancipate and empower women gathered steam at the Beijing Conference which was the United Nations Fourth World Conference of 1995 which had as agenda women's active participation in all spheres of Public and Private Life. The Beijing Conference came up with a series of blueprints to attain these objectives.

The Beijing Conference therefore paved the way for the articulation of the need to emancipate and empower women to permit them contribute their own quota into the peaceful development of the world.

Following these concerns, governments, Civil society, non-governmental organizations were thus called upon to have strategic actions in the following 12 critical areas of concern;

- women and poverty;
- education and training of women;
- women and health;
- violence against women;
- women and armed conflicts;
- women and the economy;
- women in power and decision-making;
- institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women;
- human rights of women;

- women and the media;
- Women and the environment;
- The girl child.

In Cameroon, gender based discrimination and exclusion from the decision-making organs has been greatly reduced because of the numerous legislative provisions that enhance gender parity (our target is to attain the 50/50 threshold).

The government of Cameroon has in the course of the years established several mechanisms to accelerate women's equal access, participation and equitable representation in all levels of the political process and public life. These measures have enabled women to articulate their concerns and ensure their full participation in the decision making process notably at the Local and National levels.

It must be noted however that women's rights have been recognized and guaranteed in our national legislation, significantly in the Constitution of our Country, the Penal Code, the Electoral Code, the rules and procedures governing recruitment into the public and private sectors of our Country.

Moreover, women's rights have equally been recognized and guaranteed by all international human rights instruments to which Cameroon is a signatory. Some of which include:

- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948;
- the Beijing Conference 1995;
- the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;

- the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- the MAPUTO Protocol 2003;
- the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 1995.

In this regard also, we could include Resolutions, Declarations, Recommendations, Decisions and Conventions taken at the sub-regional level.

Cameroon is determined to ensure that the rights of women are promoted, realized and protected. It is for these and other reasons that the government of Cameroon created a Ministry of women empowerment and the family. The role of this Ministry is to:

- act as an advocacy for women;
- create networks, fora and platforms where women could acquire skills and build their capacities in different domains;
- act as a watchdog for gender parity;
- highlight and take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women;
- identify and formulate policies to eradicate all forms of socio-cultural practices which are repugnant to natural justice particularly women's rights;
- mentor women on leadership and create networks to mentor women on leadership and other domains;

-facilitate the creation of mutual solidarity groupings and associations where women could be educated and share experiences on best practices to move them forward;

-formulate policies which are gender friendly;

-conduct studies and propose to government strategies which enhance women empowerment and employment.

The Ministry of Women's Empowerment carries out these actions with the technical and financial assistance of the **U.N Women** and other N.G.O's and Civil Society actors.

At this juncture, I would like to cite some statistics to buttress the progress we have made as a result of the above mentioned strategies.

At the level of Parliament, we have witnessed a significant increase in female members in both the National Assembly and the Senate. At the level of the National Assembly we have 56 female members of the National Assembly who represent their constituencies out of 180 parliamentarians representing an increase of 29.4% up from the stagnant 12.7% recorded in the past legislative periods.

Regarding the Senate, there are 26 female senators representing 26% of the 100 senators.

As concerns our local government and municipalities, we have a number of female Mayors and Municipal Councilors who have been elected into office. There are 31 women mayors out of 360, this is a mark improvement as compared to the previous years where it was a taboo to find a female mayor.

Though there have been giant strides towards the advancement of women in the decision-making process in our country, more still needs to be done in the domain of political representation, public service appointments, education and financial empowerment. Its for us as politicians who represent these women to ensure that in the performance of our legislative and oversight functions, we pay particular attention to policies which enable women's participation in decision making.

Thank you for your kind attention