

Perception of the International Women's Day Celebration in Cameroon: The Case of Biyem-Assi neighborhood, Yaoundé

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Abstract

The International Women's Day Celebration started as a socialist political movement, which fought for women's right to vote and better working conditions. Over the years this movement has fought for education, health, poverty, political integration, violence, armed conflict and the aspirations of the girl child. In Cameroon presently, the perception of women about the International Women's Day Celebrations is not fully appraised. A survey was carried out for a week in Biyem-Assi neighborhood after the International Women's Day Celebration (IWDC). The aim of this study was to generate knowledge on a gendered perception of the International Women's day celebration and the practices attached to it. The survey revealed that 50% of women were perceived to celebrate this day for no reason, as most of them did not know the theme for the day. Also, 88.9% of women indulged in a lot of alcohol with most drunk and other malpractices. The findings speculate that the IWDC is about to lose its political flavour if no action is taken. Women and men both accepted that there was a need for women to be educated more on the importance and relevance of the International Women's day and its celebrations.

Keywords: Perception, Gender, Feminism, international women day celebration, Cameroon

1. Introduction

1.1 Origin of the International Women's Day

(Cote, 1984), in her book, indicates the start of this movement as May 1908, with a meeting that took place at the Garrick Theater in Chicago. This meeting was held by 15000 women, who came together to advocate for economic and political equity for all women. They denounced the exploitation and oppression of women and demanded women be allowed to vote. This meeting in 1908 was termed the "Woman's day." In 1909, in accordance with the socialist party of America the first National Woman's day was celebrated on the 28th of February. It was a day in honor of the 1908 garment workers strike in New York, where women protested against working conditions. The press at that time talked of "women suffrage."

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In August 1910, during the international socialist meeting in Copenhagen Luise Zietz proposed that the women's day becomes a yearly event, this was seconded by Clara Zetkin (Kaplan, 1985). This proposal was accepted unanimously by 100 women from 17 countries, but no date was fixed². Zetkin suggested in a German newspaper article 'Diegleicheit' of the 28th August 1910 that the main theme for this struggle should be women's right to vote. On March 1911, there were 300 women demonstrations in the Austro-Hungarian empire supported by men and also socialist delegates (Kaplan, 1985). That same year in New York there was the triangle shirtwaist factory fire that took the lives of about 147 workers mostly immigrants³. The International Woman's day was marked for the first time as a result of the Copenhagen initiative, with over a million people in attendance. From that time onwards it was celebrated on different days but the theme extended from women's right to vote to end job discrimination and vocational training. In 1912, there was also the "bread and roses" Lawrence textile strike which was led largely by immigrant workers in response to a lowering⁴ of their wages. More than 25,000 workers joined the strikes from eleven mills, which led to bloodshed, but they stood firm till they got justice.

In 1913 during the international women's day in Russia, the women demanded the right to vote. This idea was repressed in 1914, and all the organizers were arrested. In the same year in Germany, this day was dedicated to women's right to vote and later became a mechanism of peace and protest against the First World War. Trotsky (1987, ©1961) explained in his book that the 23 February (8th March) was International Woman's Day and so meetings and speeches from the social democratic circle were foreseen, but it was never imagined that the "Women's Day" would inaugurate the revolution, as the Bolshevik committee thought it was not yet time for militant action and the revolution will take place in an indefinite future. In spite of this, female textile workers left their work in several factories and sent delegates to metal workers to ask for support of the strike. They were later joined by the Bolsheviks and the workers Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. This later became a mass strike as all were called out into the streets. And Alexander Kolontaia socialist feminist leader quotes 'The Women Workers' Day on the 8th March 1917 was a memorable day in history....' On this day (which was 8th March in the West, but 23rd February in Russia), workers women demonstrations at the St Petersburg, was termed "Bread and Peace" – demanding the end of food shortages and the end of the czarism. The Czar abdicated around the end of the month, and the provincial government gave women the right to vote (Kaplan, 1985). Cote (1984), also found 1921 documents of the international communist women day conference, where a Bulgarian woman suggested 8 March as the official international women's day in remembrance of the Russian women initiative.

After 1922, International Women's Day (IWD) with a plural was officially celebrated in the socialist and communist states until the mid 70's. The year 1975 was considered the International Women's year, and it was then the United Nations joined in the celebrations. In December 1977 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming a United Nations day for women rights and international peace to be observed on any day of the year by member countries in accordance with their historical and national traditions.

The International Women's Day over the years has focused on the advancement of women. Women rights and access to education, health, employment, equal property rights, inheritance and child control have been improved amongst others. This year 2015, is all about the Beijing +20⁵.

1.2 International Women's day in Cameroon

The international women day was originally called the International Working Women's day. It is celebrated in many countries as a day that recognizes women's achievements not mindful of their ethnic, socio-political, cultural and geospatial backgrounds⁶.

²United Nations

³Internationalwomensday.com

⁴ International women day History, University of Chicago

⁵United Nations Women

⁶Women Watch ; Women Watch

This Celebration which now takes place every 8 March in most countries in the world first emerged as a labor movement. The International Women's Day has assumed new global dimensions for women and girls in developed and developing countries alike over the years. The growing IWD movement has become a strong rallying point for women all over the world, as it supports their right to vote and participate in many political and economic arenas. This movement has been strengthened by four global United Nations women's conferences which took place from 1975 to 1995, bringing about a significant turning point in women equality and empowerment. Increasingly, the International Women's Day has come to be a time to reflect on progress made by women in the society in terms of equality, education, and health. It is also a time to call for more changes and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have in one way or the other played an extraordinary role in the history of their communities and countries.

Cameroon started participating officially in the activities of the women day celebration at the 1985 conference in Nairobi which was a follow up to appraise and review the works of the United Nations decade for Women (United Nations, 1985). During the United Nations (1995) in Beijing, twelve critical areas of concern were highlighted. They constituted women in armed conflict, women in power and decision making positions, women and health, women and poverty, education and training of women amongst other. The government of Cameroon, non-governmental organisations as well as civil societies has worked on these platforms developed in the Beijing conference; through signing other treaties like that of women's rights, creation of women empowerment centers, easy access to agricultural credit and loans, a rise in the representation of women in public offices, capacity building and trainings on trade and commerce, education of negative traditional practices like breast ironing and female genital mutilation etc. The International day of the Woman is one of such days where the state in celebrating with women, reflects on the twelve platforms of the Beijing declaration through a theme which is always suggested by the United Nations Women (Ndichia, 2010).

In Cameroon, a gendered perception of the International day of the woman apparently requires attention giving that the day appears to be considered by women as a day where people express their love for them, somewhat like a mother's day. For some women, all their life time enjoyments are reserved for this day. There is of course the political and social awareness of the struggles of women worldwide through the United Nations proposed themes which are acted upon by different women groups at various levels on this day. But most women indulge more in social activities like march pass, football matches, dance competition, drinking and eating than in educative talks and capacity building workshops on the theme proposed for the day (Ndoh, 2009). One may begin to imagine that this day is about to lose its political flavor if no action is taken to reiterate its importance and essence.

In Cameroon, the International Women's Day is one of the special commemorations that have been gathering men and women from different spheres of life for a whole week, especially in the Biyem-Assi neighborhood, in the Mfoundi VI locality. In this study, we observed, that women in the neighborhood gather to take part in activities that have been organised to celebrate women's day. Women from different social and cultural groups (Njangi groups, church groups, and others) organize football matches, handball matches amongst themselves. Also, debates, conferences, women exhibition fair, films projections, and March pass, are organised by the state to celebrate the day. The themes attributed to the international Women's day have varied over the years. They have dealt with issues of health, equality, education, poverty, violence, war, etc. The theme for the year 2014 was **2 Equality for Women is Progress for All.** Despite all these activities that have been organising to celebrate the day, some of the "women have misconstrued the whole idea and concept of women's day"⁷ according to Ndon Enie by not catering for their household activities done on other days⁸.

The perceptions of 90% female respondents hold that women need education on the relevance of the International Women's day and its subsequent celebrations. Some of the women go about and get drunk due to excess intake of alcohol; some get into fights; we have cases of broken marriages, which attest for 45% to 80% as resultant effects of the International Women's day celebration.

⁷ <https://www.worldpulse.com/fr/node/5803>

⁸ <https://www.worldpulse.com/fr/node/5803>

There are also cases of severe beatings (Nkede, 2011), as drunk women get back home, but not due to husband's refusal to buy the women's day attire (as 60% of the respondents attest). The above, mentioned problem is a result of general ignorance and or inadequate information amongst the women about what Women's day is all about (The Embassy of the United States, Cameroon, 2006). Also, there is the aspect of men afraid of losing their independence and sovereignty to women whom they believe are domestic workers and no more (Atanga, 2010). Thus, there is a need to remedy this situation if we want to have more responsible women in our society.

2. Method and Materials

2.1 Method

The aim of this study was to identify different perceptions of the International Women's Day Celebration (IWDC) around the Biyem-Assi neighborhood in Yaoundé and to raise awareness of various women focus groups on the issues and the objectives of IWDC to safeguard against future women's day celebrations. The Biyem-Assi neighborhood, Yaounde, was selected due to its small scale population. The neighborhood was stratified into four and respondents opportunistically selected. The target population for this study was 90 women and 35 men giving a total of 125 respondents. Structured questionnaires and self-interviews were employed to collect data during the week post IWDC in 2014. The questionnaire was focused on socio-demography, knowledge on WDC, malpractices of IWDC, personal opinions on IWDC, and the impressions of men about IWDC. Data collected was analysed using Excel. This survey was also conducted to enable the researchers in the non-profit organization Integrated Health for All Foundation (IHAF) generate basic knowledge and perception of the community especially women in and around the Biyem-Assi community in Yaounde. Such basic information is intended to be exploited in designing seminars and workshops which IHAF will deliver in collaborations with various country meetings and njangi groups. The aim of such mentality reframing programs is to enable women properly understand WDC so as to enjoy the celebrations with their husbands and families with many happy returns. It is believed that, after such training, the knowledge acquired will enable the women to educate other women on the motives and objectives of IWDC for very fruitful IWDC for-all. As such, they will be building responsible women by developing their moral uprightness.

2.3 Study area

The Biyem-assi neighbourhood is Biyem-Assi is a popular area of the city of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. It can be found in the heart of the 6th arrondissement in Yaoundé. The neighborhood is named after the river that runs through it: the Biyeme and Assi word which means in the local dialect "down" or "bottom." A significant population explosion and has one of the highest densities of the capital as compared to 2009. The population in this neighbourhood is estimated at 300,000 with one of the main markets in Yaoundé known as the acacia market (Oben, Emmanuel Ebai Enow & Ndi, 2014).

2.4 Ethical Consideration

The aim of the study was clearly explained to the respondents. Their consent or permission was sought verbally before data collection. Respondents had the opportunity to stop participating in the research at any time of their choice during interviews, and none opted out during this study.

3. Results

In this study, a total of 125 participants (Females; n=90 and Males; n=35) were interviewed. The first four tables show the female respondents perception of the International Women's Day Celebration, while the fifth table provides the perception of the international Women's celebration by the malefolk.

3.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of study sample

Amongst the women respondents (Table 1), their ages ranged from teenagers to the aged. The majority of the interviewees were between ages 28-35. They constituted more students and just 11.1% civil servants (holding government jobs).

Table 1: Socio-demographic variables of women who participated in the study (N=90)

	Age range (years)				Occupation		
	15-20	21-27	28-35	> 35	Students	Civil Servants	Others
Frequency	20	25	30	5	30	10	50
Percentage (%)	22.2	27.8	33.3	6.7	33.3	11.1	55.6

3.2 Knowledge on International Women's day celebration

Data reveals that the International Women's day celebration was celebrated by 50% of the respondents with no particular reason in mind. More so, 45% of them did not even know the theme of the celebration and only 11.1% could state the theme for the year's celebration. Moreover, 33.3% of the respondents picked the theme for 2014 to be 'inspiring change' which has never been a theme since the celebration of the IWDC, even though 66% of them attest to watching an educative program on this day.

Table 2: Knowledge on International Women's Day Celebration by female respondents

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you regard women's day as a special day for you?		
Yes	35	38.9
No	55	61.1
Why do you celebrate women's day?		
Because you are a woman	20	22.2
No specific reason	45	50
Because it is celebrated	10	11.1
None	15	16.7
Does the theme of the women's day matter to you?		
Yes	55	61.11
No	35	38.89
What is the theme of this year's women's day?		
Equal rights equal opportunity: Progress for all	10	11.1
Empower rural women. End hunger	5	5.6
Inspiring change	30	33.3
None	45	50
Do you usually watch educative programs on women's day?		
Yes	55	61
No	35	39

3.3 Negative practices of International Women Celebration

The IWDC in Cameroon has some unflavored practices, which are detrimental to the womenfolk, the family and the society as a whole. From this study, 88.9% of women were perceived to get drunk, just one of the unsavory practices on the IWDC which by a 50% assesment could lead to broken marriages. The International day for the Women had also included girls as part of the group since girls become women in future. Unfortunately, 61.1% of the respondents attested to the fact that girls lost their virginity (considered the pride of an African woman) on this day due to intoxicating alcohol, consent or rape.

Table 3: Some negative consequences of International Women's Day Celebration as per women who participated in the study (N=90)

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Have you heard or seen cases where women drink and get drunk on women's day?		
Yes	80	88.9
No	10	11.1
Have you seen or are aware of, cases where some marriages are broken because of women's day?		
Yes	45	50
No	40	44.4
Missing data	5	5.6
Have you heard or seen cases where some women find themselves in another man's bed the following day?		
Yes	40	44.4
No	25	27.8
None	25	27.8
Have you heard of cases where young girls lose their virginity on women's day?		
Yes	55	61.1
No	30	33.33
Missing data	5	5.56

3.4 What is the relevance of the International Women's day celebration?

Responses from informants showed that the meaning of the International women's day was not clear to many women. This can be perceived from this data set which shows that 80% had no clear cut idea what the International women's day stood for and why it had been celebrated for so long, and 55.6% believed that their colleagues also had no clue what this day meant. The general idea was that more than 80% of women found themselves at bars and nightclub on that day. All the respondents went out to celebrate this day alone without their spouses if they had but attested to the fact that the men treated them well on this day and did not stop them from going out to take part in the celebrations. Sixty percent of the respondents stated that non-acquisition of the prized loincloth by their husbands for this day was not a problem. There all suggested a training programme for women on what the International Women's day celebration stood for.

Table 4: More opinions on International women's day celebration by women

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Is it a problem to you, if you or your husband cannot afford the women's day cloth/rapper?		
Yes	30	33.3
No	60	66.7
Have you come across cases were women do not know what women's day is all about?		
Yes	50	55.6
No	35	38.9
Missing data	5	5.56
What estimated percentage of women finds themselves in night clubs and bars on women's day?		
50%	25	27.8
60%	15	16.7
80%	30	33.3
90%	20	22.2
Do you think that women should be educated on the importance of women's day?		
Yes	90	100
No	0	0
Do you go out with your husband on women's day?		
Yes	0	0
No	90	100
How does your husband treat you on women's day?		
Cook for you	10	11.1
Gives you money	10	11.1
Refuses me from going out	0	0
Others	70	77.8
From your own opinion, what can you say women's day is all about?		
Some mastery of women's day	10	11.1
I have no clear information about women's day	80	88.9

3.5 Men's perception of the International Women's day celebration

From this survey, all the respondents stated that a majority of women did not understand the meaning behind the celebration of the International Women's day. They also unanimously agreed that they treated their "women" nicely on this day and more than half of them (57%) accepted that the International Women's day should continually be celebrated. It is interesting to note that 71% of them did not buy for their women the prized loincloth for this day, which seems to be the spice of this day as men and women wear it for the march pass and to celebrate this day.

Table 5: Perception of men (N=35) about International Women's day celebration

Question	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Should women's day be celebrated?		
Yes	20	57
No	15	43
A majority of women do not know the meaning of women's day.		
Yes	35	100
No	0	0
Do you usually go out with your wife in women's day?		
Yes	35	100
No	0	0
How do you treat your wife on women's day?		
Nicely	35	100
Cruelly	0	0
Do you buy for your wife women's day rapper?		
Yes	10	29
No	25	71

4. Discussion

The survey was carried out with men and women in the Biyem-Assi neighborhood in Yaoundé, to get their perception of the International Women's celebrations in Cameroon. The celebration of the international women day in Cameroon is usually a fanfair, with a lot of color and ambience even from the first lady of the country. According to Ndoh Enie, I quote "before the day proper, there are various activities ranging from sports competitions, Arts and craft exhibitions, gastronomy exhibitions featuring the rich cultural meals of the different ethnic groups."

The data from this study reveals that 50% of women celebrate this day for no reason and most of them do not even know the theme of the day. Respondents advised education programmes to sensitise women of the importance and relevance of this day which ties with what Ndoh (2009: 1) in her own words say "I pray and hope more women should be educated and sensitized about the real need and essence of the International Women Day instead of them to abuse the precept, ideals, and principles of an International Day for Women". Furthermore 60% of women said they watch educative programme on this day, same as the Embassy of the United States, Cameroon (2006), who had a discussion around "ARS Nouveaux Horizons World Bank Report entitled "Genre et développement économique: vers l'égalité des sexes dans les droits, les ressources et la participation" and watched the film titled "Mighty Times: the legacy of Rosa Parks". Participants stated that they had learnt a lot and said: "Rosa Parks is just the right example for us Cameroonian women." The international Women's day celebration in Cameroon always come with a lot of negative attitudes as the study reveals, with more than 80% of women getting drunk and about 50% of broken marriages. This acts of immorality and bad conduct are also elaborated upon by Ndoh (2009:1) in her article quote "some even married women get themselves too drunk by consuming too much alcohol, they misbehave by talking and acting unruly and put up recalcitrant attitudes like dancing indecently. There are always stories of women who do not even spend that March 8 night at home, and for some women, they never go back to their marital homes". This ties in with Nkede (2011) article on how some women who come home drunk are severely beaten by their husbands.

This negativity by women is further explained by Ndoh (2009: 1) in her article when she says “such attitudes and misconduct by some women during International Women’s Day celebrations most men now harbour adverse feelings. Some uphold women use the day to spite and disrespect men as a result commemorating the day have no positive impact or prospect. Some men even complain some women are insolent for when women gather in bars or beer parlours they ask the men to leave because today is the day for women”.

The relevancy of the International Women’s day comes into question when data reveal that more than 80% of women go to bars and nightclubs. (Ndoh, 2009), already mentioned that some women only know that this day is set aside for them to “enjoy” and nothing else. She even went further to say that women who are cautious return home and others do not. This ties in with the words of Honorable Minister Etame Fracoise in Atanga (2010) when he says “as soon as the march pass finished, these women returned to their homes, except the women of Sangmalima...who went to the bars.” Atanga (2010), explains that the statement by the minister if not often true as many men spite women on this day because they fear the independence and empowerment of women this day brings, and so despise women who are “less domestic.” Furthermore, the idea that the law supported men in the public places, and women only as a companion of men is challenged as women now goes to public places alone, especially on this day. The independence and sovereignty of the men and a financial independence by women are challenged by the celebration of this day. This study also brought to light the fact that 57.5%of men believe the International Women’s day celebration is relevant but lamented that most women did not understand the significance of this day. This is seconded by Ndoh (2009) who also pushes for more sensitization of the relevance of this day.

Even though Cameroon women contribute a lot as their men to the prosperity of the nation, many of them are still not allowed to show their creative and innovative iideas as there are still regarded just as home makers. I remember many discussions I had with colleagues who will refer to the liberation of women in the same breath as the Beijing conference. This was not a compliment but a way of telling women that they were behaving like men and taking the positions in society reserved for “men.” We live in a patriarchal African society where men rule. Hence many women refuse to stand up for themselves because the society does nt appreciate or promote this. Women who denounce or go against their man no matter the abuse or violence they face from their men is considered “bad wives.” This last statement brings us to the question of what feminism is all about and the West and African feminism discourse (Atanga, 2013). At this point, we shall just say that many women prefer saying they are African feminist to preserve the idea of the child, family, and culture which they believe western feminism does not uphold and also shift from cultural and post-colonism.

The International Women’s day celebration has shifted from a political movement to one which is apolitical, more akin to mother’s day celebration. In Cameroon, the male respondents in the survey said it was s day they treated their women nicely, even though 70% of them did not provide their women with the prized loincloth for that day. In Other countries like Russia, France, Germany amongst others men gave their women flowers, brothers agave their sister’s presents and students gave their female teachers presents⁹.

5. Conclusion

Based on the forerunning discussion, we can conclude that this preliminary survey has provided information stating that some women still have a wrong perception on Women’s Day Celebration and as such has resulted in malpractices contrary to the WDC fame. The purpose of the IWDC movement in Cameroon appears to have shifted from a political movement to a day of “enjoyment and freedom.” Recommendations area proposed an ethics of good women’s day practices for women, especially the less educated woman. Additionally, routine capacity building programs by the appropriate stakeholders should be promoted. These rolling seminars and workshops may be organized during the last two month preceding each Woman’s Day on the motives and objectives of women’s day with particular emphasis on the theme and characteristics of a “good woman.”

⁹ Internationalwomensday.com

To penetrate women folks, njangi houses, church groups, community development associations should be exploited as appropriate forums for the seminars. This will probably result in more enjoyable, enlightening, fruitful and responsible women in women's day celebration.

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