

# **Creating Educational Equity for Women and Girls of the Mbororo Marginal Population and the Handicapped**

**Muh Peter Chiakom**

Senior Social Affairs Assistant

Social Consultant

Member of the Family Health Development Organization (FAHEDO)

**Cameroon**

Some communities in Cameroon live in marginal/marginalized situations. These underprivileged or disfavoured communities include the pygmies of the South and East Provinces, the Mbororos of the North West Province the Mountain Dwellers of the North and the Handicapped or people with disabilities. They could also be called minority groups. Some of the factors responsible for their marginal situations are discussed here under.

1. **Illiteracy:** Their illiterate status or lack of education blocks them from playing any role in the social and economic evolution of the nation. Such citizens are eliminated from the developmental pipeline of the country. The situation is worst and a very sad one for the girl child who at times is forced into marriage even at underage.
2. **Gender Issues:** The women's place in these communities' remains the home and her sole role is to bring forth children and distances herself from her male folk. Men and women even husband and wife never sit in the same room, same hall, or walk along the road together.
3. **Religious Constraints:** The Mbororo community in the North West says that their religion does not permit that the men sit together with the women. This makes it difficult for them to come close to other societies that have a tilted view and will preach the equality of all. Some Muslim children during the fasting month take on an undeclared holiday from school.
4. **Economic Activities:** For livelihood, the Mbororos and Mountain dwellers practise cattle grazing whereas the pygmies do hunting and fishing. These activities keep them out of urban centers where health, educational and social amenities avail.

These are just some of the factors that promote the marginalization of the above-cited communities in Cameroon and thwart their social integration. For this reason, they live in exclusion seemingly rejected.

The women, girls and handicapped in such communities remain the victim of circumstance. They constitute minority or marginal groups within a marginal population. One would imagine the fate or severeness of marginalisation of a sub marginal group within an underprivileged society that still has firm grips on primitive cultures. Fairness is absent in respect of education of women, girls and the handicapped in communities under cover. Taboos or customary beliefs remain obstacles to the education of the women and the handicapped. The woman remains a being for reproduction and child upbringing and not more. The handicapped have no reason for education. The girl child must go to marriage and some of these marriages are forced and at underage. This is why the population of these children thins down as the school career progresses. In a study carried out in a primary school, only one tenth (1/10) of Mbororo girl pupils form class one went through class seven. The enrollment starts dropping from class five when small pointed breast appear on the chest and at the end of class six there is mass departure for forced marriages and pregnancies. In fact the girl child in the target population has her right to education abused not to talk of handicapped one. She is ignored and abandoned to herself. I wish to quote here the glaring example of the armless Mariamou in the Sabga Mbororo community of Tubah Sub Division, Mezam in the North West Province. Delivered without the upper limbs, the parents saw no reason sending her to school. At the age of ten she sits at home displaying handling habits with the feet, a talent that could be encouraged and developed at school. To cap this, all there is untold unfairness in the education of the feminine population and the handicapped in communities living in marginalisation in Cameroon.

As said earlier they live in isolation or in exclusion and even rejected in social life. The socialization process is not succeeding and either they are failing their social environment or their social environment is failing them.

The educational inequity for women and girls and the handicapped is not a non-event to the public and Government of Cameroon. Government attitude and other bodies is to redress the situation. Nationally there are two ministries created that oversee the welfare of children and women. These are: -

1. **Ministry of Social Affairs:** This Ministry with its child welfare programmes has an objective the welfare of the child physically, socially, mentally as well as educationally whether handicapped or not regardless of sex. The organizational chart of this Ministry has a department of marginal populations.
2. **Ministry of the Family and Women Affairs:** Its objectives include the education of the girl child and empowerment of the woman.

Still with Government's intervention, there is the law No. 83/013 of the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1983 relating to the Protection of handicapped persons in Cameroon. This law covers both the physically handicapped and the visual impaired persons or the blinds whether male or female. This law defines as handicapped any person who suffering from a deficiency physical or mental congenital or accidental finds it difficult to carry out the functions of a valid person.

Still internally Government encourages private initiative. Missionaries, associations as well as individuals are also concerned with educational equality for women, girls and handicapped persons. Several organizations have developed policies in favour of the handicapped.

Internationally, Cameroon a member of the United Nations has ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in its Article 2b states that everyone has the right to education. Also, the Africa Charter on the Rights and Well-being of the child has been ratified by Cameroon. Article 11 of this charter declares the right to education for every child in Africa or at least in member states. Article 13 of the same charter requests that handicapped children be given right to special measures of protection corresponding to his physical and moral needs under conditions that guarantee his dignity and which favour his autonomy and his active participation in community life.

For these policies to be implemented the necessary human resources are required. The team of social workers in the various fields of education and animation has to be formed. So far as this concerns marginal groups and handicapped it must be admitted that there are many lapses here in Cameroon. The school of social workers in Yaounde trains personnel on contemporary social issues but source related techniques to our target population seem lacking. Special education trainings are not applied and this is why a graduate from social work school posted to work in an institution for the blind has to learn brail while at work. General education teachers are unable to handle pupils or students with visual impairments. This explains why the clients under discuss remain in exclusion. Special centers and schools are created for each category of handicapped. The lack of technical equipment and materials must not escape unnoticed.

Policies are formulated both internally and externally to reverse the educational inequity for women and girls and the handicapped so are strategies adopted. After the law No 83/013 of 21<sup>st</sup> July 1983, a text of application came through decree No 90/1516 of 26<sup>th</sup> November 1990 fixing the modalities of application of the said law. In chapter one of text of application the education of the handicapped child and adolescent is carried out in ordinary schools and special education centers. In article 2 of the same chapter, auditive, visual and mental cases are given special education that would permit them to acquire the autonomy to enter ordinary schools. Another strategy adopted is "Educational Assistance". This comprises age dispensation, class repetition and

financial assistance to name but these few. It should also be noted here that children born of handicapped parents are also considered for scholarship awards.

The same text provides assistance adapted to professional training, socio-economic reinsertion, re-adaptation to work post and the socio-economic installation of handicapped persons. Other provisions include sporting and leisure activities, and individual and collective assistance. Collective or group assistance is awarded to assist a group of handicapped persons carry out some economic activity for their welfare. It is necessary to quote here the A.N.A.C. a French acronym meaning "Association Nationale des Aveugles du Cameroun" or "National Association for Blinds of Cameroon" in English. By this Blind persons group themselves and are given assistance as a sort of capital to do business, produce crafts works or even carry out some small scale animal breeding.

Another strategy is the creation of special education centers. The Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind (R.I.B) Buea was created in 1980 by Decree No. 80/380 and comprises two sections.

1. The Professional Section
2. The Primary Section.

Since Government encourages private initiatives, strategies employed by missionaries organizations and individuals must not be left out. Some missions have created schools for the Blinds and handicapped. A good example here is the school for the Blind attached to the Bansa Baptist Hospital, which admits both boys and girls. The Baptist mission also runs the community Based Rehabilitation programmes in the North West Province. There is also the Christadelphian School for the blind and handicapped in Mbengwi Momo Division. Non-Governmental organizations are not only watching, they participating to promote the welfare of the blind, the handicapped and the marginal communities. The Family Health Development Organization (FAHEDO) Cameroon offers medical assistance as well as school assistance to the communities under cover. It also carries out awareness raising campaigns and educative talks on situations that impede the welfare of out target populations and how they can be eliminated. PLAN CAMEROON an International Non-Governmental Organization is child focus. This N.G.O. seeks to promote the education of the girls' child. This year the organization offered 187 study scholarships to Mbororo marginal population female students. It also issues birth certificates to children of this community to enable them enroll in educational institutions.

The Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) is created by the Mbororo themselves to promote their welfare by curbing or eradicating illiteracy in their community. Special stress is laid on the girl child education.

Programmes on mass media (radio, television and press) sensitize the population on the equality of all human beings and promotion of human rights irrespective of the status of the person.

In conclusion, creating educational equality for women and girls and handicapped populations of marginalization that live in exclusion or even rejected remains the concern of government and public in Cameroon. For this reason, the internal policies are formulated and international declarations ratified to have this achieved. Institutions are created as well as organizing workshops and seminars by bodies and organizations to name these few, are targeted at realizing this mission. Despite this effort little is being achieved, as educational establishments in the country remain segregated. There is lack of technical personnel and equipment. Teacher training schools programmes lack formation in special education. The will of attaining educational equity for women and girls is there but the way seems to delay.