

Women at the Summit of Larger Corporations in Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper analyses the access of women into top managerial positions within larger companies in Cameroon, a sub Saharan African country. Based on a qualitative study where documentary research and content analysis are used, the paper it affirms that some women bearing the title of general managers in Cameroon are dynamic, competent, and good leaders within corporations where they are appointed. After presenting some details of the social context in which women got access in top management, the paper develops a description of the reign of women at the head of larger corporations.

Keywords: Cameroon, women in top management, larger corporation, competency, gender integration

1. Introduction

The early years of women in the labor market are characterized by confinement in subordinate positions and occupation of trades that are a continuation of the occupations of women in the household structure (Boserup, 1984). When women enter the labor market, they occupy jobs that require caring, and household related skills and absence of a supervisory role (Bielby and Baron, 1984; Anker, 2003).

Over time, the situation of women in the labor market experienced some dynamics. There is a growing participation of female labor rate and, the feminization of managerial positions, decisions, and companies summit (Morisson, 1994; Coquery Vidrovitch 1994). Globally, women around the world have been moving into positions with more power within public and private sectors. Female workforce is no more only concentrated at the "sticky floor", some women substitute men in managerial positions and break through the glass ceiling by getting access into the highest positions in companies (Wirth, 2001). With these new figures, women nowadays are amongst workers that benefit of good salaries, do supervisory tasks, and participate in the decision making of companies. They are not only present in medium and low positions of management. They also share privileges formerly reserved to men in the top management of corporations. To the level that, there is no more a hierarchy level, that can be defined as a male universe. Indeed, even though vertical segregation with its glass ceiling continues to be observed in the labor market, the image of this reality has changed with the women representing a few percent of top managers. The glass ceiling is sprinkled with cracks that give way to top management to some women (Buscatto and Marry, 2009).

By analyzing the evolution of vertical segregation these last decades, it can easily be observed that women have access to all levels of managerial positions from junior management to corporate head (Wirth, 2001). This reality named in gender studies "the breakthrough of glass ceiling" is a phenomenon difficult to describe because women Statistics collection as general managers, chief executive organization, board members and board chairpersons are not available for all countries there is no international database that systematically collects such information over time. Information are obtained from various survey conducted by different groups and organizations that do not cover all countries and have limited sample sizes (ILO, 2015).

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The statistics available describe more the situation of women in top management in companies that are registered in stock exchanges and/ or were covered by the World Bank enterprises survey. Concerning Africa, data that describe the presence of women in management in general and in top management in particular are available from the World Bank enterprises survey carried out from 2002-2014. However, the scattered data on the range of women leading companies show that this rate is quite low globally. Data from the survey conducted by the Agency on equal opportunities for women in the workplace in Australia found that women occupy 8, 2% of management positions in companies and 52 6% companies have no women directors (BIT, 2004).

The presence of women in top management varies from one sector to another. In traditionally male sectors, women are still struggling to reach the top of the hierarchy. And few cases are emerging in areas such as mechanics, metallurgy. In sectors as transport, energy, construction, they are quite absent. It is in traditionally female sectors that female management develops gradually. The majority of women in management positions are concentrated in the sectors of health, education, communication, banking, telecommunications, insurance, and retail (BIT, 2004). These professional groups are reconfigured and do no more appear as workshops where women work under the leadership of men. In some female dominated and concentrated companies, women work under the supervision of a woman.

The access of women in top management is not a hazard. The first factor that contributes in breaking through the glass ceiling is the standardization of the criteria of the promotion within larger corporations. Indeed, it is because criteria for selection and promotion are well established that qualified women can move up the ladder as qualified men (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The feminization of top management is also relevant to the progression of the career of the women. On the labor market, it is qualified women who progressed without delay that find their glass ceilings shattered. This because, top managers are selected amongst highest grade achieved workers or amongst "fast-trackers" who are workers that had reached the threshold sooner than the average applicant (Powell and Butterfield, 1994). The access of women to top management is a phenomenon that has been possible from the capacity of women to build social capital in the workplace, and in the society. Indeed, familiarity with colleagues, joining and participating in networks with both men and women within the organization influences promotion. This because, selecting officials prefers to choose applicants that they may know and whose work is well known to them (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

The feminization of top management is a social phenomenon that has several growth patterns worldwide. In some countries like the United States, it is expanding. From 1999 to 2003, women rate in top management passed from 11, 2 % to 13,6% . In other countries such as Cyprus, the feminization of the top management is slow to take off and still recorded zero percent (BIT, 2004). In this last country, the glass ceiling is still firm above the women's heads and it prevents them from reaching the highest decision-making positions in organizations and companies. In sub-Saharan Africa, women's place in top management is between the situations of the two countries quoted above. Data available shows that women are present in top management since some years. In addition, within time slow progression of rates are noticed (ILO, 2015).

In Cameroon, a country of central Africa in the sub Saharan Africa, the entry of women in the top management of largest corporations is a phenomenon that dates back about three decades. It starts during the end of the decade 1980, where women start occupying high positions (directors) in companies (Nga Ndongo, 2014). Since the access of women into managerial positions, various publications have been produced to document and analyze this social phenomenon. Some of these studies are biographical and emphasize on the main realizations of emancipated women (Amani and Talla , 2007; Nga Ndongo, 2014).

This study appears as a continuation of the scientific works that have been carried on this rich field of research. It aims at making an analysis of the reign of women at the top of big companies in Cameroon by focusing various questions. The main topics developed in this article are related to: the socio political environment in which women access to the summit of companies, the exercise of the authority by general manager, the impact of general manager on the company's growth, and the place of women within companies during the reign of female general managers. Indeed, the analysis of the reign of women at the top of management will be realized by answering the following questions: in which socio cultural context do women get access to the head of management? How do female general managers exercise authority and power? What are the outcomes of female general managers' reigns concerning the growth of the companies? Does access of women to the top of management changes the professional status of women within largest corporations.

2. Methodology

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative research was carried out. Materials used were various written documents: press articles, journals of the companies, and biographical narrations of women with the title of general managers of state enterprises and multinationals.

2.1. Data collection

Consistent with this approach, using documentary research was considered the most appropriate method of data collection, allowing researchers to have a vast quantity of information related to the reign of female general managers. Indeed, documents consulted for the purpose of this research were produced during the past twenty-five years. The nature of these documents were: press articles published in the national public and private media, journals produced on the annual life of the companies and some biographies of female general managers. In general about thirty documents were exploited and used for the corpus of this article.

2.2. Data analysis

The data were submitted to content analysis theory (Bardin, 1977). This step included mainly the analysis of the texts that were read carefully. During the analysis of the corpus, similarities and differences in the data were identified then used to construct paragraphs for the article.

3. Women access to the prestigious post of general manager

The general manager position of a private or public organization is as a particularly interesting case to analyze the access of women in managerial jobs in general and jobs at top management in particular. This position is within Cameroonian companies, the most prestigious and most endowed with power and authority. Women's access to this position appears as a mark of the improvement of the status of women in the public space in general and the organizational space in particular. It is an element that highlights the "end of women as social cadets" in Cameroonian society with access to symbolic capital (authority and power) and, economic capital (good salaries) attached to this status.

The arrival of women in this position is a fairly recent phenomenon in Cameroon compared to other advanced regarding the place of women in the public space. Indeed, women arrive to general manager positions some decades after the valuation of women in politics, sports, and culture. Women hold political responsibilities from the year 1975. During this year, a woman, was appointed Minister of Social Affairs after serving as deputy minister of posts and, deputy minister of health. Years later, women are appointed general secretaries of ministries and ministers in other ministries.

It is fifteen years later, during the year 1990 that, women have access to the prestigious title of general manager and change the configuration of the summit of larger corporations. During this decade, only one woman in the country holds this position. The decade 2000 experienced very timid advances regarding the number of women in the general manager post. About six women were appointed. Since the starting of the decade 2010, more women have been appointed. In 2015, twenty-five years later, twelve women from different nationalities (Cameroonian, French, and South-African) have worn the prestigious title general manager in Cameroon.

The woman appointed in the decade 1990, replaces a man. Amongst the six women appointed during the decade 2000, two are affected at the head of newly created companies, three occupied posts previously headed by men and a woman replaces the 1990s' woman.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, a movement like that of the 2000s promotes women at the head of largest corporations. The specificity of this decade is the arrival of women to the head of private enterprises, multinational subsidiaries and, an increase of the number of female general manager. With their arrival, the glass ceiling begins to be broken in the range of companies with private capital. Thus, the reconfiguration of the place of women is effective within the private and public spheres of the economy. During this last decade, the number of women occupying the post of general manager doubles. It passes from six women to ten women. This important increase is reliable to the fact that the majority of women appointed during the 2000s decade continue to hold their post during the decade 2010. Amongst the six appointed, only one of them step down.

However, all branches of the economy are not affected. The tertiary sector that comprises services activities is the part of the economy whose top management becomes more feminized. Sectors of the economy where women have access to these prestigious positions are: finance and economy, trade, communication, health, public sector and telecommunications. Indeed, among the general female directors in the country, some work under the Ministry of Finance as the general manager of customs, others under the Ministry of Economy as the general manager of the bank for small and medium enterprises and corporations investment. Women have not yet integrated the branches of companies in the primary and secondary sectors of the economy. Indeed qualitative and quantitative changes in the status and roles of women in the economic world are only observed in the service sector, where women are not exclusively confined to menial jobs. They are now counted among the patrons. In agriculture and industries, women are still excluded to top management.

Various events that the Cameroonian society came across, contributed to this enhancement of women in the professional area. Literature on the professional status of women in enterprises has always identified two major factors to limit or promote the rise of women to top management: socio-cultural context as holistic element on one hand. And, the characteristics of women are presented as individualistic elements on the other hand. The analysis of these two major variables shows that they experienced many changes since independence. Indeed, Cameroon is witnessing major changes concerning the status of women in the society, and their socio demographic characteristics.

3.1. Social context of the feminization of the general manager position

3.1.1. A context in motion towards the advancement of women

The ascension of women to the post of general manager in large corporations is achieved in a context marked by the engagement of the government into the promotion of women within the Cameroonian society. This engagement is clearly seen by the country's participation in international activities realized in favor of women, the transformation of institutions, and financial support giving to women at the national level.

Cameroon engages itself and participates actively to the various conferences organized during the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975. Moreover, in 1979, Cameroon ratifies the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and legal dispositions for gender equity.

At the national level, the country creates a ministry in charge of issues related to women. In 1984, on the eve of the second World Conference on Women in Nairobi, the division of Women affairs of the Ministry of Social Affairs is erected into Ministry of Women affairs. This institutional change is followed by changes in the responsibilities of the institution and the means of action spent by the government to improve the status of women. Initially, the Status of the division in charge of the promotion of Women affairs was assigned: to develop women's promotion policy and to ensure the full participation of women in development and international cooperation. After being erected in ministry, the institution in charge of promoting the rights and freedoms of the fairer sex, one of the more vulnerable social categories, sees its charge notebook expand. With this institutional reorganization, the new ministerial department has to ensure the missions of the former division, and others new missions affected. Amongst new missions, the ministry supposes to engage itself in: women's training through the auspices of specialized organizations (the Women's training Centers), dissemination of information on women through the centers of documentation for women, coordinate the activities of various non-governmental organizations in charge of the promotion of women and promote communication on issues of women and girls. The particularity of the creation of this ministry is that, it was as an early solution to the problems inherent in the operability and efficiency of programs put in place to improve gender issues. To fulfill these new missions, four technical divisions are created: the division of women social welfare, the division of the family welfare, the division of the women economic welfare, and the division of studies, planning, and cooperation.

Other actions taken by the government were concrete assistance to women. In this section, government realizes many activities with women initiating individual projects or projects within associations. In this section of actions, financial support was given to women, and women's associations that initiate high generating income projects (Sindjoun, 2003).

In a context where the movements for women's rights have axes that are more oriented towards economic empowerment policies for women and not towards a true argument with claims to improve the status of women, the ministry has played a key role in the emancipation of women. With international partners, has conducted numerous campaigns on women's rights. Changes in women's design were also favored by demographic changes in the female population and the feminization of fast careers.

3.1.2 A context of feminization of higher education and rapid career advancement

Female access to higher education and the access to managerial jobs it entails, strongly influenced in "breaking through the glass ceiling." Indeed, women in top management in Cameroon are women who have attended at least two academic cycles in the higher education system and that integrated public, or private companies in a senior staff position. Moreover, the female general managers in Cameroon outside being at the head of a large corporation share the feat of having rapid careers. Indeed, compared to other women, they are part of the minority of employees that do not trample after recruitment. They know progressions in careers in the early years. The first woman, who has achieved the feat of breaking the glass ceiling in Cameroon, is a specialist in economics, finance, and strategic management of private and public companies. After having a doctorate degree in economics in France, she started a brilliant career that began with a senior position in an insurance company.

Then, she continues with consultations at the World Bank before joining the company that she definitely manages in 1975. At the heart of this organization, she quickly rose. She enters this organization as an authorized representative in internship. Two years later, she was recruited and appointed Deputy Director in the division of Operations. Four years after her entry, she was appointed head of the department and Deputy Director of Operations before being promoted to Director of Operations. Later on she left this company for Central Bank where, she will serve as censor before being given the post of general manager. Her story has some similarities with the story of the first woman who runs a private company in Cameroon. After university studies in France where she works for several years, she was recruited in Cameroon, to the post of director of administration and finance. After a few years in that position, she was appointed Deputy General Manager in charge of Human Resources and Finance, then General Manager, a position she held in another African country, Botswana before coming to assume it in Cameroon.

Women's access to the heads of companies reveals the changes in women's careers. They are not totally excluded from rapid promotions. Thus, some women manage to have successful careers. Access to top management appears as a phenomenon that is part of a larger movement, one of the changes of the career paths of women. This is because women experience promotions during the first years after their entry into activity they manage to move up within the company. Moreover, women appointed as general manager are not taken at the sticky floor to be propelled to the top. They are women that have a lot of experience and are occupying post in the senior management staff. The woman, who was director general of customs, arrived at this position after twenty-four years of service in customs. Out of the National School of Administration and Magistracy in 1984 as a customs inspector, she experienced her first promotion after carrying out four years of service. After ten years of service, she had already received three nominations and climbed some professional stairs before being propelled to the head of the company where her reign was characterized by an improvement in the general state of the corporation.

4. The reign of women at the head of larger corporations

In Cameroon, glass ceiling breakers, are mostly pioneers of female management in the corporations where they are appointed. Amongst the female general managers, only one woman replaces another woman. They others have opened the reign of women over the companies. A chronological view of the reigns of the female manager shows that the reign of women is either inserted between the reign of two men or situated at one edges (at the starting, or the ending) of the history of the company. The shortest duration of a female reign has been four years. During this time that last sometimes more than ten years, women exercise themselves in the art of management and ruling of corporations.

4.1. Female general manager, the captain of the ship?

After being appointed at the top of state enterprises and subsidiaries of multinationals, the female general managers have specific missions and challenges during their mandate. To get there, they put in place managerial techniques that fall within the directive or authoritarian management. Indeed, strict instructions, penalties and rewards, decisions making by the manager with little participation of employees and even the chair board are some elements that characterize the reign of women at the top of state enterprises and subsidiaries of multinationals.

The arrival a woman at the head of the Cameroon Customs was followed within the company by the establishment of a number of measures: congratulatory notes, bonuses and penalties. The appointment of a woman as head of the Cameroon Recoveries Company, did not favor the participation of Deputy General Manager in decision making. Indeed, the General Manager takes decisions without consulting him. To the point where she is described by the press as a woman refusing any collaboration with her male deputy general manager in the treatment of important issues concerning the company. Other female managers are recognized as those who make rain or sunshine in the companies they manage. In short, they are true leaders who make decisions, exercise authority. Thus, the reign of women in top companies do not have a particular color. It is closely as the reigns of men at the top of large corporations in Cameroon. They do not change the ruling system of companies. After climbing to the top management, these women have governance system that is similar to the one man who preceded them used.

In the public, the female general manager herself leads ceremonies or delegation in the partnership. They do not let the men around him take the lead. At the company's flagship ceremonies such as the installation of promoted staff, they preside over the ceremonies, lead the delegations for negotiations, and make proposals to the board and undertake new projects for the company's growth. The female general manager of the company, that is in charge of the promotion of the local materials, initiated negotiations, and even partnerships with several structures. All these facts highlights that Cameroonian women have the capacities and competences to manage big companies. The dynamism of these women has an impact on the life of the company.

4.2. Women in management and the company's growth

The management of companies by women in the majority of cases is characterized by changes, in operating mechanisms. The changes are recorded in various domains: finances, production, and human resource management. The oldest general managers arrived at the head of a company that was insolvent and almost going bankrupt. When taking the head of the company, it has a low amount of share capital of 7 billion. And, when leaving the post in September 2003, after thirteen years of reign, she leaves a capital of 22 billion. Her passage at the summit of the company is also characterized by the increase of salaries of the employees and improvement of management. She takes up several challenges including maintaining the State of Cameroon as majority shareholder of the company.

However it is not the only woman who recorded golden letters in the Cameroonian economy. The woman who presided over the Cameroon Customs has upgraded this company. Arriving at the top of an institution that worked with manual procedures, she has modernized the company with the computerization of the system and the cult of performance. She initiates a few years after her access to the summit, automated customs clearance that reduces manual operations and customs checkpoints, time for procedures, trail customs operations, and reduces costs. She also introduced in the customs, an application for the management of transit to neighboring countries with the shipment tracking by geolocation. Madam General Manager of Customs to improve transactions in partnership with companies creates the Customs-Business Forum. With these new management tools, she raises the revenue of the customs that becomes a reliable source of revenue for the state.

While some women remake the financial health of companies entrusted to them, others excel in product diversification and improvement of the social climate of the organization. The reign of a woman at the head of a printing corporation is particularly marked by the expansion of the range of products of the company on the market. When she reaches the top of the structure, it produces a single newspaper: "Cameroon Tribune". Under her reign, other newspapers are emerging: "Alter Eco", "Weekend, Sports and Leisure" and "Nyanga". In addition, during the reign of the male general manager she replaces, employees frequently go on strike. While with her management system, the social climate in the company is calmer. The dynamism of women is certainly noticeable in public enterprises, but also in private companies. The Cameroonian woman that occupies a post of general manager in a telecommunication company, subsidiary of a multinational runs with dexterity the company she has in charge. She has increased within her two years of reign, the turnover of the company. Actually, she runs with about 186, 3 billion while at the time of her appointment, the company has a turnover below to 150 billion. During her reign, the number of sites covers by the network of her company has doubled, and more efficient infrastructure was set up. Along the women whose dynamism is the pride of the Cameroonian economy, some women leaders are part of a certain lethargy and even bad governance.

Some women appointed at the head of companies do not influence their companies. Since their affectation, major changes in the companies are not noticed. One of the female general managers of the decade 2000, who recorded a reign of more than ten years, has not put in place mechanisms to solve financial and managerial problems that her company faces since several years.

4.3. The place of women in companies during the reign of the female general manager

Women's access to the summit of large corporations certainly gives the public space a new configuration that shows some changes in the woman's professional status. They are not only subordinate workers but also workers that participate at decision-making.

However, the situation observed at the summit of the company is not generalized at all level of decision making. In these companies as in all others, women remain a minority amongst junior and senior managers. During the reign of female general managers, women are scarcely appointed. During 15 years of reign, one female general manager one has only promoted woman to the post of director. In another company, all the collaborators of the female general manager in the executive team are men. No woman bears the title of director. Thus, we do not observe a feminization of management positions within the structures run by women. Women's careers are progressing slowly in these structures where appointments are nevertheless made from time to time. Female general managers appoint more frequently men than women. Thus, participation of women in decision making does not appear as a factor in favor of women promotion in largest companies. Access to top management is not a key path way to women's integration within companies.

In fact concerning gender issues, companies run by women are not examples. They do not have any gender mainstream policies.

6. Conclusion

Women's access to top management is one of the current dynamics in Cameroon. Through the propulsion of women in top management, and the margin of freedom granted to them, the state-owned enterprises and multinational subsidiaries are presented today as a public space where women are not only confined to the traditional female statutes. They also occupy high positions, generally occupied by men. Thus, opportunities are given to them to assert their dynamism and contribute to the success of their companies.

Face to these opportunities, some women decide to prove that manage a largest corporation is not only a masculine job. They put in place some innovations that improve the efficiency of the company. Indeed, raising the turnover of enterprises, making product diversification, restructuring the working procedures and mechanism, and improving the climate social of the companies are some realizations made by female general managers. With the margin of power granted to women, a revolution takes place in the management and the performance of Cameroonian largest companies. The weak point of this management system is that, it does not benefit to gender equity/integration in managerial posts. In fact, even though women run companies, female employees continue to have slow career progression and constitute a minority amongst junior and senior managerial posts.

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