Social representations: the heart of community psychology

Sakki, Inari

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Chapter 2

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE HEART OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY[1,2]

*Inari Sakki, Raul Kassea, Teemu Vauhkonen
and Anna-Maija Pirttilä-Backman*
University of Helsinki, Finland.

ABSTRACT

Social representations are at the heart of communal psychology for several reasons: they are people's understanding of the topical issues and their contexts, because by definition they are the everyday theories that people form of new and threatening issues. The theory of social representations acknowledges the interconnections between perception, thinking, emotions, values, norms and action. The approach is also open to a variety of data gathering and analyzing methods. All this means that it is optimally wired to deal with people's everyday experiences.

Everyday theories are formulated in day-to-day interaction, but they also have their roots in history and they get new material from the mass media. The theory introduces three processes in the formation of social representations: anchoring, objectification and naturalization. By making a distinction between the nucleus and the periphery of the representations, the theory also gives important new insights into why changes are sometimes so difficult to achieve. This also means that the theory is very useful in the promotion of change.

Results from our own studies done in Cameroon concentrating on women's roles and positions will be used to demonstrate the specific aspects of the theory and its usability.

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[1] Some parts of this chapter have been previously presented and discussed in Pirttilä-Backman, Sakki and Kassea in Järventie, Paavonen and Lähde (Eds.) (2006) and in Kassea (2006). They are reproduced with the permission of the publishers.

INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality is a global challenge. Women's positions take different forms in different communities, and also challenges and aspirations differ in different groups. In this article we examine women's roles and positions, and everyday theories of them in Cameroon. More specifically, our aim is to demonstrate how the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961; 1984) can be a useful tool in community psychology, both in analyzing the communities and their challenges and in promoting change. As e.g. Howarth (2001) argues, being theoretically exhaustive, methodologically sensitive and socially oriented, the theory of social representations has much to offer for the study of community. We will first briefly describe our target country, Cameroon, with an emphasis on women's position, and continue by presenting the basic axioms of the social representation theory and demonstrating in more detail with our focus group interviews the feasibility of the theory.

CAMEROON

Cameroon is a West African country with a population estimated at 18.9 millions in 2008 (AFDB, 2009), spread over ten administrative provinces now called regions. There are more than 200 ethnic groups in the country (DeLancey, 1989, 96; Mbaku, 2005) and two official languages, French and English. 40 per cent of the population are Christians, another 40 per cent practice indigenous traditional beliefs and 20 per cent are Muslim (The World Factbook, 2006). The United Nations Gender-related Development Index of 0.524 ranked Cameroon 114th of 156 countries, indicating a large gender disparity in basic human development (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2007). The human rights situation in Cameroon today is characterized by tight restraints on freedom of expression and association, security forces that face no repercussions for their actions, and bad prison conditions, all of which serve to intimidate those who might voice dissent (Nkwebo, 2007). The latest report of Amnesty International (2009) accuses the Cameroonian authorities of gross violations of political human rights and of using routine killings and torture to repress political dissent. The United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC, 2008) has also previously expressed serious concern about the Cameroon authorities violating the rights guaranteed by several United Nations' committees, including CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women).

Pre-colonial Cameroon, among some other African countries, had a dual system of social order: women and men formed complementary groups and both genders managed their own areas of life (Okonjo, 1976). In some indigenous Cameroonian communities, women and men formed two parallel, gender-segregated systems that complemented each other in regard of economic and social roles (Kassea, 1987; Ngoa, 1975). This dual system was not, however, commonly in use in all regions or by all ethnic groups (Laburthe-Tolra, 1977). In the dual system ethnic groups were also mostly patrilineal, with men in the head positions of these communities (Kassea, 1987). During more than seven decades of colonialism, the dual system was disrupted throughout the country and the continent: men entered the public sphere and women stayed in the private realm (Vincent, 1976; Kaberry, 1952). The era of post-independence has brought increasing awareness of the oppressed position of women, as well

as action for change (Barbier, 1985); a specific African concept of feminism has emerged: negofeminism. It emphasises the necessity of negotiating gender roles anew (Nnaemeka, 2003). The conceptual distinction of Moscovici (1988) can be used to see the subservient position of women in the private sphere as a hegemonic social representation; it has lasted unquestioned over generations. Since the 1980s, it has been challenged by NGOs and television and radio programmes that target gender inequality (CAFEJ, 1996). These discussions provide forums for polemic social representations and the emergence of emancipated representations.

The legislations of countries provide some kind of backbone to the forms that activities can take. Cameroon inherited two different legal systems (French law for the Francophones and British law for the Anglophones), which coexist with local customary law that is still broadly applied although the Supreme Court has sanctioned the primacy of contemporary over traditional law. The Cameroonian legislation is relatively recent: the Constitution was promulgated in 1972 and revised in 1996 (ordinance 96/06), when some provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights were incorporated in the Preamble. The Preamble of the Constitution also included several provisions aimed at enshrining gender equality (World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), 2003).

The revised Constitution (the preamble of Law No. 96/6 of 1996 amending the Constitution of 1972) declares that 'all shall have equal rights and obligations'. Despite such provisions recognizing women's rights, women do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. The civil law theoretically provides equal status and rights for men and women. However, no legal definition of discrimination exists, and some points of civil law are prejudicial to women as the examples below indicate (Afrol, 2005; OMCT, 2003).

The Cameroonian Civil Code states that the husband is the head of the family and as such he is regarded as the moral and financial manager of the family (Article 213). The law (Articles 108 and 215) also states that the husband has the sole right to determine the family domicile and to manage the communal property, including his wife's personal property (Articles 1421 and 1428) (e.g. Ngue, 2000). The Civil Code (Article 7) allows a husband to oppose his wife's right to work in a separate profession if the protest is made in the interest of the household and the family. As a consequence, some employers require a husband's permission before they hire a woman (Association of Cameroonian Female Jurists (CAFEJ, 1996; CEDAW, 2000; OMCT, 2003, p. 126).

According to Cameroon's Civil Code, both spouses must consent to the marriage (e.g. CAFEJ, 1996, p. 35). Nevertheless, forced or early marriages are still widely practiced, particularly in rural areas and in the Northern part of the country. Often the husband, who is sometimes many years older than the girl, pays the bride's parents a 'bride price'. When the price has been paid, the girl is considered the property of the husband (Afrol, 2006; OMCT, 2003, p. 127). The continuing existence of polygamy and the different ages for marriage between girls and boys allow discriminatory practices (CCPR, 2000).

Formal schooling was considered undesirable for women in early modern Europe (Whitehead, 1999); as Rinehart (1992, p.2) puts it: "Received wisdom about the nature of woman included a belief in the undesirability, even to an assumption of the impossibility, of a fully intellectually active woman. To educate her is to equip her to become independent of rather than dependent on man, another subject rather than his object, active rather than passive, in short, to give her the means to strike out for an equality with men, whatever that

equality may mean in a given time or culture. Such equality is frightening to many of both sexes."

Gender discrimination in western education was later exported to colonised territories. As one of the major colonial inputs in Africa, for the first happy few who acquired it, schooling was meant for "civilizing the savages". It was at its best "education for adaptation" rather than "education for modernisation"; later, girls received "education for domesticity" (Koponen, 1994, p.526). Boys received the skills necessary for employment in European enterprises as clerks, technical and agricultural instructors. "Much of the domestic education provided for girls was seen as particularly relevant for the future wives of the emerging African male élite." (Waylen, 1996, p.62).

Different theories contribute to explain low schooling rates and gender asymmetry in post-colonial African educational systems. The economic perspective emphasizes family size, resources constraints, sibling ranking, child labour, and parents' investment strategies (Alderman & King, 1998). Buchmann (2000 p.1349) suggests that educational inequalities are better understood as due to the evaluation of returns to education and household return constraints than as due to gender stereotypes or reliance on child labour in Kenya. The author notes: "Parents invest less in daughters when resources are limited, as in the case of households with many sons" (p.1372). Cultural arguments focus on socio-linguistic contexts, religious beliefs, gender patterns and indigenous norms guiding educational decisions in Mali (Opheim, 2000). In Cameroon, Fonkoua, Tsafak, Tchombe et al. (2006) studied girls' schooling from social, psychological, pedagogic and geographical perspectives. The lack of money remains the leading cause of school dropout (up to 46 per cent of dropouts) but also pregnancies are an important factor among females in junior high school (Eloundou & al., 2004). Some 3.3 per cent of girls withdrew from school for marriage reasons or due to pregnancy (Tabi, 2005).

THE AFRICAN FAMILY

Studies in this subject have given us information that the family unit takes different forms and may have some different functions across the world and history (e.g. Lahikainen, 1976; Georgas, 2003). While in Northern Europe, and generally in the Western world, family has long been understood to be composed of a married couple and their children, in the vast majority of all countries, including all of Africa, family denotes a larger community, an extended family (Lauras-Lecoh, 1990; Siqwana-Ndulo, 1999; Washi, 2002; Georgas, 2003). The important role of the family is also declared in the African Charter of Human and Peoples Rights (article 18) which states that the family shall be the natural unit and basis of society. The basis of a family in both the West and Africa is marriage. The emphasis on individualism and independence of a marriage in the Western world and the emphasis on collectivism and interdependency in an African marriage can be considered the most distinctive difference between the two (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1999). In the African family the so-called biological family does not necessarily live together: the children may not live with their parents, the man may have several wives (polygamy) and he does not necessarily live with them, but on the other hand the household may include other biological or more distant relatives (Lauras-Lecoh, 1990). In Africa, the respect a person commands is connected to having children. According

to estimates, only two per cent of fifty-year-old women and four per cent of men of the same age live alone in Africa. (Lauras-Lecoh, 1990.) According to Therborn (2004) a distinctive feature of the African family is forming alliances between families by marriage, in which the groom's family gives property and services to the bride's family as dowry. Another characteristic of the African family is the practices involved in inheriting property. Typically property is passed on through the male line. Families consider important respecting the elderly members of the community, fertility and the collective family community over individual freedom. Polygamy is another characteristic of the African family and is rationalized foremost with the important role women have in farming and child care.

According to Calves and Meekers (1999) the firstborn child unites the family and the married couple. Producing offspring is seen to be the purpose of marriage and infertility often leads to divorce. Especially for women, children are the basis of social status: the larger the family, the better her chances for securing her living in old age.

Traditionally young people in Africa, especially girls, do not participate in the marriage decisions their parents make. On the other hand, there are also practices which give both the boy and the girl full power to decide who they wish to marry. That consent of all parties is required in a marriage agreement is now included in national laws in many African countries. Development in the matter increasingly follows along these lines, although parents and other relatives still hold a central position in arranging marriages. The parents' approval is still evident as a widely spread norm that manifests itself as the practice of dowry among other things. (Therborn, 2004.)

In many African countries women marry very young. Men marry at an average of 6.3 years older than women. One of the largest changes in African marriage practices recently, however, is the rise in marrying age. The tradition of dowry is an influential factor in this trend. Men simply cannot afford to marry very young. On the other hand, education has an effect on the marrying age of women: education rises the marrying age if the young woman has studied for a minimum of six years. As education has become more widely common the number of polygamous marriages has decreased. The change in marriage practices is still slow and the effects can for the most part be seen only among women living in urban areas. (Lauras Lecoh, 1990.)

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

As Kagan and Burton (2001) say, community psychology is concerned with how people feel, think, experience and act and work together, resist oppression and struggle to create a better world at a communal level. Social justice and inclusion, liberation and empowerment have been proposed as the values governing the world (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001). The theory of social representations we have brought up in this chapter is a relevant contribution in community psychology because it is the theory of everyday thinking that uses the group as a basic unit (see Flick, 1992 for a comparison of different theories of everyday knowledge). The theory is concerned with how people in groups form and transform their everyday theories in interaction.

The theory of social representations (e.g. Moscovici, 1961; 1984; 2000) originates from Serge Moscovici's (1961/2008) seminal work in the reception of psychoanalysis in France.

He studied how catholic, liberal and communist media presented psychoanalysis to their audiences, and how people in everyday conversations made the abstract theoretical terms (e.g. complex) into concrete forms and how they used old categories for understanding new ones (e.g. free association was attached to catholic confession). The prototypical target for the theory is the diffusion of a new scientific theory into everyday discourse. However, the theory and the term have also been applied to other forms of everyday ideas and concepts (see e.g. Jodelet, 1989/1991 for a study on madness and Billig, 1987 for discussion on different uses of the term).

What then are social representations? Moscovici (1973) has defined them as a group of values, conceptions, ideas and practices that have two functions. First, they serve to create order, which enables individuals to act in the physical world and exert control over it. Second, they make communication possible, which makes interaction and naming and categorizing new things easier. The theory of social representations underlines the fact that the individual and the social are interdependent and inseparable in the construction of social knowledge and thus it presented a challenge to the traditional approaches of social psychology. Social representation theory focuses on the processes and also specifically takes note of describing what the representations are made of. The formation of a social representation involves three processes: *anchoring, objectification* and *naturalisation*. Anchoring means integrating a new idea into an existing network of meanings, i.e. anchoring classifies and names people, objects and ideas into different categories. The objectification process transforms an abstract idea into something nearly physical and tangible. In objectification, the iconic aspect of an ill-defined idea or entity is discovered in order to bring the concept and the image together. Naturalisation makes an object part of social reality by giving it a life of its own. (Moscovici, 1984.) Two kinds of elements, core and peripheral, are expected to form social representations. They have different roles in sustaining the representation. Core elements do not change easily, they are stable and non-negotiable and they serve to generate the representation's overall meaning and to determine its organisation. Peripheral elements are more flexible and context sensitive and they give a tangible form to the core elements. (Abric, 2001.)

Another idea that can be used to examine the essential content of social representations is the concept of thema/themata (Moscovici & Vignaux, 1994, p.62). Themata are shared information and beliefs that are often referred to in conversation or that are taken for granted (Moscovici, 2001). According to Moscovici, themata express the fact that every representation has its opposite (cf. Billig, 1991). Markova (2000) defines themata as opposite categories. At some particular point in history, for some reason or another, they become problematized. Then they become the centre of attention and they begin to contain tensions and contradictions. Examples of themata are oppositional pairs such as nature-culture, reason-emotion, edible-inedible, beautiful-ugly, etc. Every oppositional pair does not, however, form themata: themata are formed only of those oppositional pairs that become the centre of public attention and debate.

Individuals and groups of people communicate and interact with one another through the medium of shared representations, arbitrary language and meaningful actions. Moscovici (1988) calls the representations shared by all members of the group hegemonic because they are uniform and compelling. When a smaller group shares the same views, the term emancipated representation is used. These representations are variable and to a certain extent autonomous.

However, there are situations when social representations are not shared. These kinds of situations can happen when, for example, people come from different groups that are in conflict with each other. Then it is probable that their different social representations will lead to misunderstandings and real conflicts of interest. Moscovici (1988) calls these kinds of representations polemic. These representations are produced by opposite groups, their representations do not agree with each other. The society as a whole does not share them. The polemic representations are expressed as supporting or not supporting something and they are often thought to be mutually exclusive.

Social representations can be at the heart of communal psychology for several reasons: they are people's understanding of the topical issues and their contexts, because by definition they are the everyday theories that people form of new and threatening issues. Contrary to many other theories social representation theory underlines the interconnections between perception, thinking, emotions, values, norms and action. The approach is also open to a variety of data gathering and analyzing methods. All this means that it is optimally wired to deal with people's everyday experiences. In other words, social representation theory can elucidate how community is conceptualised and experienced in everyday life. As Howarth (2001) argues, the social representations theory has much to offer the study of community since it tackles such issues as how we legitimate certain beliefs and understandings and empower versions of our communities and ourselves through social representation, how we build and challenge the social realities of communities through the use of social representations, how we use social representations to include and exclude within and between communities, and how we construct community identities through developing social representations.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

As part of our study on women's societal agency we conducted in 2001 several focus group interviews in different parts of Cameroon with women and men living in villages and smaller towns and with several experts on gender equality matters. In this article we will use interviews that were done in the villages and smaller towns.

We conducted thirteen group interviews with women and four group interviews with men. The average age of the female villagers interviewed was 36 years (20-65 years), whereas the average age of the male villagers was 38 years (21-51 years). Most of the people interviewed were farmers or small business owners. The majority of them had children and they were married. The educational level of the interviewees varied from illiteracy to intermediate education among the male and female villagers. Originally our goal was to interview both groups of young and middle-aged people in all villages/towns, but for practical reasons many of our groups were mixed in regard to the age of the interviewees. The length of interviews varied from 45 minutes to one and a half hours. In the villages/towns the number of persons per group interview varied between four and fifteen.

The starting point for the interviews was, whenever possible, to always have a female interviewer for the female groups, because gender and equality may be things which women do not discuss freely with men or which they cannot at all discuss with men outside their family (Morgan 1988, p.102; Kassea, 2006). The second contributor of this chapter conducted

all the male groups and a couple of interviews with female groups on account of schedule difficulties. He has extensive experience of interviewing African women so he had the resources to make apt probes for examples, justification, counterarguments and so forth. Having the local male member of our research group to conduct some of the women's interviews can also be considered somehow natural because feminism in Africa involves a willingness to co-operate with men (see e.g. Nnaemeka, 2003; Kassea, 2006). One of the village female groups was also interviewed by a local man because there were no women in the village capable of translating the themes of the interview from English or French to the local language.

Why did we choose to interview people in different parts of Cameroon? As mentioned above, there is a great variety of different ethnic groups and differences in cultural practices in the country. In a previous study (Pirttilä-Backman et al., 2004) we divided Cameroon into three major cultural areas, the western area, the northern area and the central area, and we detected significant differences between them in regard to individualism and collectivism.

The division of the country follows our previous studies; we included the western and the north-western provinces of Cameroon in the western area. A distinctive characteristic of the different groups in this area is that the chief of the village holds the highest authority and the village society is closely arranged around him (Neba, 1987). The northern area includes the northern and the far northern provinces. These provinces have a hierarchical society and close family relations. In the north, Islam has effectively rejected the European ideologies and Christianity widespread in other parts of Cameroon (Holtedahl, 1993). In the west, collectivism is explained most of all by tradition. In the northern area collectivism is connected to religion as well as tradition (Pirttilä-Backman et al., 2004). The central area includes the central, southern and the south-western provinces of Cameroon. The most significant characteristic of this area is the lack of influential traditional chiefs found in other parts of the country (Neba, 1987). Some of the ethnic groups in the area are known for their egalitarian society structure (Hewlett, 1995). In previous studies (Pirttilä-Backman et al., 2004) we noticed differences between these three areas: women were most collectivistic in the north and least collectivistic in the south.

To protect the anonymity of the people interviewed we will not use the names of people or villages or specify ethnic groups. We have changed the names of interviewees but their gender is still evident. Instead of mentioning villages, we give only the area the village is located in.

We presented the interviewees with three dilemmas as part of a longer interview. The three dilemmas were constructed to cover topical issues in women's positions in the communities:

1. A sixteen-year-old girl would like to continue her education, but her parents want her to get married and start a family.
2. A mother has had three children under difficult conditions and she fears she may die if she gives birth again. However, her husband wants more children.
3. A woman wants to take part in politics to improve her community and her country. However, her husband opposes the idea because he thinks politics is the area of men.

In the selection of the dilemma topics and in the dilemma construction we built on the research group's local knowledge on women's position (see e.g. Kassea, Sakki, Pirttilä-

Backman, 2009; Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1997) in Cameroon. Girls' schooling vs. getting early married is one of the central dilemmas in Cameroon. Education is highly valued (Kassea, Sakki, Pirttilä-Backman, 2009), but so is marriage (see above the African family).

The second dilemma, more children vs. health protection, deals with another current social question in Africa: women's rights to their own body. Women's rights over their bodies and reproductive rights are codified (CRLP & GREFELS, 1999); however, they are more theoretical than applied, given the psycho-social importance of children, and domestic violence that are often considered as family or private sphere issues rather than public ones. Health and death risks are more often associated to fate rather than to objective factors. In sub-Saharan Africa, contraception was used by 16 per cent, with only 20 per cent of married women (CRLP & GREFELS, 1999, p. 18). In Cameroon, out of the 638 general practitioners, only 12 per cent were in rural areas; there were 41 gynecologists, 1526 state registered and 2477 staff nurses in 1997 (AFBD, 2000). In 1999, maternal death was estimated at 550 for 100.000 live births in Cameroon; in 1996, there were estimated 69 midwifes for a ratio of 0.05 per 10.000 inhabitants; in 1991, 38.6 per cent of women lived in polygamous unions; (CRLP & GREFELS, 1999, pp. 70; 76). These statistics combined with weak infrastructure and poor medical equipment contribute to the hazards related to reproductive health.

Women's representation in politics is low: six out of some 60 ministers, 25 of 180 members of parliament and 20 out of 339 mayors. Their low interest in political participation with 35% registered in electoral lists (Kassea, 2006) is a societal challenge, because a developing country needs the contribution and viewpoints of all citizens. A democracy is "unfinished or even virtual if it fails to integrate half of its population into public life, but hard-won citizenship is bound to remain a dead letter if women feel unconcerned by public affairs." (IPU, 1997, p. 142).

We used dilemmas with semi-structured interview schemes[3] as a method, because it allows us to learn, how do the groups see the prevailing situation and practices, how things should be according to their evaluation and what those factors and resources that help women to achieve their goals are and what the factors that hinder them are. The dilemma interview also provides the interviewees with the possibility to reject the options that the researchers may offer as different ways to proceed in the situation.

After presenting the dilemma the interview continued in a semi-structured way, as the interviewees were asked to clarify and justify their answers. They were also asked about the rights and duties of the different parties in the dilemma. As the basic idea of the focus group method goes, the interviews at their best gave us bountiful data and were even intense at times. Nevertheless, we were not always so successful. Most of the village interviews were done in the local native language so we had to find local interviewers and instruct them in quite a short time, which is why there are some shortcomings in the interviews. However, the variation introduced by the local interviewers may also have enriched our study.

Prior to analysis people with the necessary language skills translated and transcribed the interviews into English and French. Eventually all of the interviews were translated into English. During this stage of the process some of the details and emphasis may have been lost as is the case with all translation. After a detailed look at the material we analysed it by using the Atlas-ti program. We began analysing the dilemma by reading them several times to learn the interviewees' ways of understanding the situation and possibilities for action. We used the

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[3] The full interview schedule is available from the last author.

ideas of semiotic analyses, more specifically Greimas' actantial model (1986) as heuristic devices in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning structure. We made summaries of whole interviews and also examined who the main characters are and what happens between them by identifying such actants as subjects, objects, helpers, opponents, senders and receivers.

THREE DILEMMAS

Schooling vs. Marriage in Early Age

The first dilemma concerned a girl's right to continue her studies in the case when the girl's parents wanted to marry her off.

The fact that the girl was studying was seen as positive, while forcing her into marriage was perceived as negative by most Cameroonians we interviewed. The emphasis was on slightly different things depending on whether the interviewees were men or women, or whether they were from the Northern, Western or Southern part of the country. In conversations with either sex, the material benefits of marriage were referred to, but they were especially emphasized in conversations with men. This may be connected to the idea that the men saw the dilemma from the male perspective and therefore the man's role as the one who pays the dowry and builds the family home is linked to the material side of marriage. In conversations with men the reasons for forcing girls into marriage were expressed as rational, practical reasons. As one interviewee expressed it:

> A3[4]: I think that there are two reasons for the parents to send their daughter to get married early. Firstly, **they are poor**, secondly they are afraid that if they let her continue, she'll **become a prostitute and she'll be sick or she'll be pregnant**. Here are the reasons; it's not only because of the dowry. It's also because they want their daughter to be happy. In a family. (North, men)

In the excerpt above a man from Northern Cameroon surmises that there are two main reasons for forcing girls into marriage. The first reason is that the girl's parents are poor and because of poverty, they marry off their young daughters. The second reason is that the parents want to protect their daughter from a variety of risks. Being married may protect the girl from becoming a prostitute and from out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The same kind of justifications, in which the girl's freedom is anchored to risks, prostitution and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, are evident in the conversations with Northern women as well. Instead, interviewees from the Western and Southern Cameroon did not talk about these risks.

In our interview material people in North Cameroon differ from people in other areas in regard to the way they solved the dilemma. In conversations with Northern villagers marriage is automatically connected to cattle and the dowry paid by the man.

> Mod: Today, we are in <a village in the north> where a 16-year-old young girl wants to continue her studies whereas her parents want her to get married. (silence)

A4: **In such a situation, we have to buy oxen.**
Mod: Oxen for doing what?
A4: To plough.
Mod: Do you understand the question? Yes, your name?
A3: <says his name>. We must imagine two solutions. In the first case, the girl accepts to get married and there is no problem. In the second, the girl wants to continue, so there will be a problem. She wants to study but **her parents want her to get married in order to have oxen**.
(North, men)

Getting married is objectified in money, cows and goats. The men say that practically all 16-year-old girls in their area are married. In conversations with women in the same area, the possibility of the girl continuing her education was considered remote.

A: Such situations occur when the parents of the girl are poor, so they send the girl to be married in order to have some money **to care for the rest of the family, to pay the school fees of the boy** because in <the village in the north>, **the boy has a greater value than the girl**. <The village in the north> doesn't think that the girl can go far at school.
Mod: What are the rights and the duties of the young girl?
A: **We marry our daughters off without their consent in order that they could stay at home and build a family. That's all. However it's by the girl, by her dowry that we have some oxen, sheep, goats, money and so on.**
Mod: Describe a girl in the situation evoked in the 1st case.
A: The girl goes against her parents, there are quarrels and misunderstanding. Then, the parents oblige her to get married, in spite of her refusal.
(North, women)

The Northern women speak of forced marriage as a practice. The education of boys comes first and the girls sacrifice themselves so that the boys can have better opportunities. Girls are portrayed as merchandise to settle the father's debts or pay for the son's education. Poverty and views on the girl's lesser value combine to hinder the education of girls.

Women in South Cameroon expressed in conversations ideas that differ the most from those of interviews conducted in the North. These women see the idea of a 16-year-old getting married impossible.

A1: According to me, I consider this **act an insult, a scorn**. I will not bear this decision because my daughter should continue her studies. **Marriage comes after studies**.
Mod: But sometimes, the parents go and take the dowry without the consent of the girl and the wife.
A1: If it's my daughter who is concerned, I'll not accept the thing even if it had happened. My decision is that she should continue.
A2: To oblige a young girl of 16 years to get married is **abnormal. She's not 21 yet.**
A3: A girl of 16 years old shouldn't stop schooling to get married. She's **too young**. **Girls, as well as boys must have the right to the same education**.
(South, middle-aged women.)

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[4] To make things easier for the reader, we have emphasized the salient parts of the excerpts in boldface. Mod = interviewer, A = interviewee

The women from the South justify objecting to forced marriage with the idea that a 16-year-old girl is too young and immature to be married, and therefore the marriage would not last. This may be connected to the woman's traditional role in the family: women do the hard work; they take care of the family, the household and food. Same kinds of explanations were also brought up in the discussions of Western women.

> A1: I will not appreciate that kind of thing because first the **child does not understand marriage** and secondly, she **may not love the husband**. Consequently, the **marriage will not last**.
> (West, young women)

In the excerpt above a woman from Western Cameroon says the girl should not be forced into marriage because she is not ready for it and because she probably wouldn't love her husband, and therefore the marriage would not last. These Cameroonian women seem to anchor marriage to love and they speak of a very modern concept, marriage based on love, while at the same time there are also a lot of forced marriages in the country (e.g., Afrol, 2006; OMCT, 2003). Justifications based on the girl's young age and the couple's happiness and durability that were similar to those above were mostly evident in conversations with women from the West and the South, but not in those with women from North Cameroon.

The groups of men and women interviewed for our research in Southern and Western Cameroon thought education was important and wanted their own daughter to continue studying as long as possible. In the North men seemed to support girl's education but at the same time, they saw it risky because of unwished pregnancies, sicknesses and prostitution. The Northern women did not really oppose the idea that the girl would continue her studies but these women expressed strongly that the girl's main object in life was to become a mother and a wife, and like men, also women saw risks in girls' education. Thus in North women's roles were seen in a very traditional way. On the level of conversation our interviewed favour education, but in a conflict situation the girl is powerless against her parents. What would probably happen in such a situation is that the girl wouldn't be able to continue studying and would have to marry. In other words, education is considered a good thing, but obeying her parents is seen as the only practical option besides educating the parents on the subject, asking help from other members of the family or the community. Disobedience and running away to the city are objectified to prostitution.

Although the interviewees generally supported the idea that the girl continues her studies, they often did not justify this in any way. However, modernization of Cameroonian society was sometimes brought up as one explanation.

> A2: In my opinion, in the <village in the West> custom, our parents tell us that we should bring them help. A girl getting married at that age, you are not doing any good to the child. Secondly we the young people in <village in the West>, we see that we need some education, more education. Our fathers are more educated than our mothers; the stages that these young girls want to take, they are different from generation to generation. So **we are in a modern society now, and we need to receive more education** than our parents. **So if we could have seminars and training for our parents, that would be better.** Here in <village in the West>, if you start crossing the parents, or if a child disagrees with the parents about the marriage issue, may be sometimes, the parents may forget all their concern about the child, if she refuses marriage. (West, men)

In the excerpt above, a man from the West underlines that the younger generation of Cameroon needs more education than the older ones, and that the solution for the dilemma would be to educate parents to understand the importance of education.

Another kind of justification for the importance of women's schooling was offered by two women from West Cameroon who were of the opinion that the girl's right to education is based on the Bible.

> A: The child can **know her rights from religion since the Bible preaches against human rights violation**. At first, **tradition was a barrier to the child's right** as it is a taboo for a child to disobey the parents.
> (West, women)

In the excerpt above, tradition is seen to impede the realization of children's rights in Cameroon. Traditionally, it has not been accepted for a child to oppose their parents' authority. Any new rights are connected in this interview to Christianity, which forbids violation of human rights.

Overall, the views of the women and the men are largely congruent: the majority supports the girl's right to continue her studies and opposes forced marriage. In spite of this, as the two previous excerpts from Western Cameroon also bring up, traditional norms, that dictate a child is not allowed to go against their parents' will and according to which girls have no ability to progress further in their studies, favour boys studying at the girls' expense and confine the girls to the roles of mother and wife. Based on our research material, the tension between modern womanhood and traditional norms is evident.

More Children vs. Health Protection

The second dilemma concerned the wife's right to refuse giving birth to more children if a new pregnancy would threaten her life.

Both the men and women in Cameroonian villages expressed fairly unanimous opinions that the wife has the right not to have any more children in such a situation. Her health and the possibility of death were the main justifications to the wife having this right. A couple of times the woman's right to refuse was justified by Christianity, as a man from North Cameroon says in the excerpt below. As in the schooling dilemma, women's rights are again anchored to Christianity, but this time by the Northern men.

> Mod: So, you think that there will not be such a problem in the future. Here in <this village>, does a woman have the right to say no when she doesn't want more children and when her life is endangered?
> A6: **Christianity authorises it.**
> Mod: So, it's because of Christianity?
> A6: There are cases where it's the husband who doesn't want more children because when a woman has difficulties in childbirth, her **husband wastes a lot of money because of medical prescriptions** and so on. So, sometimes he finds it's better for them to stop having children.
> Mod: What do you think about women who have problems in childbirth and who don't want to have more children?

A7: It's normal if her life is endangered. The **solution is that the man should have another woman.**

(North, men)

Nevertheless, as is evident in the excerpt above and in conversations with Cameroonian men and women in general, the main solution to the problem is considered to be that the man gets himself a new wife. Taking another wife is seen as a perfectly natural way out in conversations with both men and women. Having children is shown to be an important value in conversations with Cameroonian women, as is evident in the excerpt below.

A1: We welcome the idea **that a woman should bring forth many children because if you only brought up two children and death takes away all, how many will remain**? So, five is good so that if death takes away two, three will be left.

Mod: But sister, what if death carries away all five, what will you do?

Al: No, it can't take them all. Death may take away two, leaving behind three. People may say, **don't stop because the man badly needs children**. I have witnessed a situation where a woman goes and gets another wife for the husband to bear his children, and they did. **That is to really satisfy the man's ego, getting many children. The man understands the first wife's physical condition. This is to satisfy tradition. That is the traditional woman's right**. The woman believes that since **the husband is the head of the family, anything he decides, she just has to accept it. But not anything that's harmful to you!**

(West, women)

The women we interviewed hold on to the right not to have more children in the situation given, but they do not question the husband's right to take another wife. As we can see from the excerpt above, the wife may even find a new wife for her husband to bear more children. In several conversations the man's duty to ask his wife's permission to take a new wife was brought up. However, a Cameroonian man said: "If the wife loves her husband, of course she will give him permission to take a new wife."

Man's superiority to woman comes up in many of the interviews. Especially women talked about the husband's power that the woman is unable to oppose. In three of our group interviews with women the interviewees told us that the man has the final say in this matter.

A: The **woman can't decide**, the man is the one who gives. **The man only wants children**, no matter what your condition as a woman is. (West, women)

Our research material does not indicate large differences between the areas in the way they handled the dilemma. It is mostly women from the West and the South who differ slightly from the men and women from the North as they brought up more alternative ways to solve the problem, perhaps, because they found it easier to identify with the situation. They mentioned pleading with her husband, getting divorced or seeking refuge with her relatives as alternatives for the wife described in the dilemma. Two women thought they would resort to seeking help from experts if they had a similar situation. One woman we interviewed said she would ask a nurse to phone her husband, and another woman said she would take part in a family planning program without her husband's knowledge.

In conversations with both men and women, the woman's right to refuse to become pregnant again is emphasized. On the other hand, both sexes agreed almost unanimously that

in the situation described in our dilemma, the man has the right to take a new wife. However, this was not always the case, but in some interviewees, men's right to have several wives was opposed.

> A1: **I don't think that polygamy goes with our social realities. So, a man cannot have just his pleasure more than a wife and many children**. The pregnancy must be interrupted and they will still live together.
> A2: **In the past**, there were vast forests that needed to be occupied. There were spacious houses, materials for building were cheap. Many wives and children were needed to occupy the big house If the first wife used to deliver unhealthy children who sometimes died, the husband would be obliged to choose another wife with the assent of the first lady. So, it was not a surprise for her to see one day a newcomer wife in the compound. In rural areas, to manage 3, 4 or 5 wives was a matter of having resources and a good organisation. (South, men)

In the excerpt above interviewed men from the Southern part of the country say that unlike in the past, having several wives is not appropriate in modern Cameroon.

Taken together, although the Cameroonians we interviewed saw that the wife has the right to refuse having more children in these conditions, it cannot be considered a remarkable indication of women's rights as life and death is at stake. If anything, the methods of solving the dilemma reveal large-scale inequality between men and women. Having many children is an important value in Cameroon and in achieving this men are the actors, women the means. The woman's job is to give birth to children and if reaching this goal is hindered, the man is within his rights to take another wife. In the interviews marriage is strongly anchored to having children and women to motherhood. Although both the men and women interviewed admit that preserving the wife's life or health is a preference that is higher than having children, it may not impede the man's desire to have children.

Enter Politics vs. Obey Husband

The third dilemma concerned women taking part in politics. The Cameroonian male and female villagers and townspeople mostly agree that politics is not for women.

In all conversations with the men it is evident that the wife should not aspire to participate in politics if her husband opposes it.

> Moderator: So, in a case a woman wants to participate in politics to develop her community, what will happen?
> A1: There would be **conflict in the family, leading sometimes to divorce**.
> A2: Unless someone is a politician, he would not like his wife to be in politics. **It's a very rough game**; and if a woman is in politics, unless she is not married, she will bring politics to her home, and may be the husband can not do politics. Politicians don't say things that are right, **there are lots of tricks in politics; a female politician may end up controlling her husband at home, and that could end in divorce**; that's my feelings. A couple may discuss and agree that both do politics for their personal benefits first, the welfare of the area second. **Politics is good for men, who are public figures; politics is not very good for women because they can not be as direct as men**.

A3: Politics is not very good for women because politics need a lot of time. A woman links her man to the children; education passes from a woman to the children well, better than from the father. **Women politicians will spend family time in meetings; the home will be disorderly, the children will not benefit from their mother again**. **The husband will not have the comfort he needs from this woman. The couple will not have time to sit down for family business.**
(North West, men)

In the interview excerpt above, men from North West Cameroon bring up many obstacles for the wife's political career. The men think the wife should not participate in politics, because it's a rough game where a woman can't make it. The men worry that the family's internal power relations would become unfavourable to the husband if the wife pursued a career in politics. The wife must take care of the children and other responsibilities at home and being involved in politics should not hinder her from doing that. The man might feel he was ignored and that he had lost his wife's respect.

A2: **When the woman goes out, she's superior to the man. Whatever he'll say to her, she'll not understand or respect him because she feels bigger than the husband**.
Mod: To go out means to be higher than the other?
A2: Yes, **because when she goes out, she could speak with many different people, so she could be more informed, better informed than her husband who is always at home**. You stay at home, you're closed in while the other goes out. Inevitably, you'll have problems.
A7: When the woman goes out, she could be tempted to understand what other pretenders are saying.
Mod: Which pretenders, please explain?
A7: **Her boyfriend**.
A6: Most often, politicians are rich people while the husband is poor. **So for example, after a meeting, they go in a snack bar to drink some beer and eat good meat whereas the husband is at home, eating only beans or vegetables**. That's where the problem is, when the woman asks for money.
A8: The **woman becomes more stubborn** when she is in politics. She begins to say that: "Ah! You, as a husband, you have no worth, you are a good-for-nothing! I've learned things, true things" (people are talking all together, someone laughs)
A: **When she goes far from the village, you can not control her**.
(North, men)

In the excerpt above, men from North Cameroon expressed their worry that if the wife becomes a politician, she will also become better informed than her husband and feel superior to him. Also jealousy was often expressed in men's discussions. Women pursuing careers in politics are considered to be a threat to the traditional gender system in Cameroon.

When justifying their views, Cameroonian men emphatically refer to the duties of mother and wife: who would take care of the children and other responsibilities at home if the wife spends her time in politics, the men ask. If the wife started participating in politics, she would neglect her duty and her husband would be the victim in the situation. A woman's duty is to be a mother and a wife. The womanhood is again anchored to the family.

A2: The husband is right when he firstly opposes himself to the profession that his wife wants to practice **because it causes damages: children are neglected, the man is underfed,**

there is a lack of sexual harmony... The consequences of all of this can be the separation; I would no longer talk of repudiation or divorce, if the husband feels himself neglected...

Mod : When the man is in politics, does the matrimony suffer? His children, his wife?

A2: It's the same thing when the man is a politician, the consequences are similar. He neglects his wife, his children. The solution is to succeed in reconciling the two responsibilities.

(North, men)

Politics is considered to be an area mostly and almost only for men. According to the Cameroonian men we interviewed, women lack qualities that are needed in politics.

A: There are more women than men in <village in West>, but how many of them are actively participating in politics right here? Just one to 3, no more, because **the game is not good. Many find themselves unable. Politics is naturally a men's game, for risk bearers, too difficult for women**. (West, men)

As a man from Western Cameroon brings up in the excerpt above, women were seen as unable to do politics that is a rough game with lots of tricks meant for risk takers–in other words, politics is objectified in men. Women aspiring to take part in politics are likened to a prototype with male characteristics.

All in all, in interviews with men, women's participation in politics is clearly opposed. Women are not considered to be as able as men. Being a mother and a wife is seen as the most important duty of Cameroonian women and that is a binding responsibility. According to men, if the wife spends her time in politics, she does not fulfil her primary duties at home.

Even though the idea of women participating in politics was generally opposed, there were some exceptions. Especially in interviews with men in South Cameroon there were references to times changing and equal rights for men and women.

A: I think **that women are similar to us. Now, they're being given rights of liberty and dignity.**

First, we should prepare them for this new situation because in no time at all, it's anarchy. **Women have always been below men since the time of our ancestors.** Now, it's dangerous for us to tell them that we're equal when they used to be submissive. **We must prepare them progressively for that new situation**.

(South, women)

Although, as is evident in the excerpt above, the idea of women being equal to men is taken cautiously, times are only just beginning to change. The new ideas are just emerging and starting to challenge the old ones.

Like the men, the Cameroonian women we interviewed saw the husband's opinion as a nearly insurmountable obstacle. In the next excerpt, a woman from West Cameroon feels that the wife should have her husband's permission before aspiring to a political career, because without it, she cannot do anything.

A1: **The husband should accept it before the woman gets into politics because there's nothing a woman can do without the opinion of her husband. Unless the woman gets divorced before getting into politics.**

Mod: How do you feel about that?

A2: **I can't do something when my husband doesn't agree.**

Mod: What rights and duties does the wife have?

A3: The wife has the duty to take care of her husband: his food, his clothes, etc. The husband has the duty to care about his wife's health, her clothes, his children's health and education.

Mod: How would you describe a woman like this who wants to go into politics?

A4: **A woman like this will get divorced if her husband doesn't want her to participate in politics.**

(West, women)

As in the excerpt above, divorce is sometimes given as the only possibility to getting her own way in the situation described in the dilemma. Combining political career and family does not seem to be an option for most of our interviewees. Thus it seems that the representation of women's roles can not include both roles.

Although divorce is associated to freedom, it is not considered to be a positive thing. On the contrary, the women we interviewed saw divorce as more of a threat than an alternative.

Mod: What do you think will happen? If the wife gets into politics? If the wife does not get into politics?

A: If a woman wants to get into politics and her husband doesn't accept it, **I think the better way is to forget about it because there will always be problems between them which can lead to a divorce.**

Mod: How would you feel if you came to divorce because of politics?

A: **Politics is like a child you give birth to and who can sometimes die after. So if you got rid of your husband because of politics, and it does not work, you won't be happy.**
(West, women)

For the women we interviewed, preserving their marriage is important. To keep harmony in her marriage the wife must have her husband's permission to pursue a political career. Unlike the Cameroonian men, the women presented several ways to get the husband's permission in such a case. According to the interviewees, the wife may persuade her husband by making her husband see that through the wife's political career, the status of the whole family would become higher or by demonstrating her abilities to her husband at home or by trying to please him more as the two excerpts below from Southern and Western Cameroon elucidate.

A: The woman must first know **how to manage her timetable, satisfy the desires of her husband, keep the house and his clothes clean. I think that if she cares enough he will finally accept** (South, women)

Mod: Do housewives have the right to participate in politics?

A: **The way a wife handles household affairs can encourage the husband to allow her to participate in politics, especially if the wife demonstrates leadership skills.**

Mod: Can you name any woman in your area who participates in politics on the national level?

A: The Delegate for Education for <name of the village or area>is an example. From her activities, it is clear that **if women were given the chance, they would do even better than the men**. (West, women)

As is evident in the excerpt above, unlike the men, the women did not consider their own qualities unsuitable for politics. On the contrary, there were some positive and emancipated images about female politicians as well. As the interviewed woman from Western Cameroon states above, if women were given a chance they could perform even better than men could. Even though the husband's permission was considered the most important thing when it came to women participating in politics, the women also expressed views that emphasized women's liberties and equal rights.

> A1: Here, there is also quarrels, fighting and misunderstanding because the woman wants to be free, autonomous meanwhile she's not allowed to blossom, to emancipate herself. The woman wants to know but she's smothered. **We think that the woman should be free, autonomous or independent, because the superiority of the men over women gives us a feeling of frustration, of fear vis-à-vis them.**
> Mod: What are the rights and the duties of the wife and the husband?
> A2: Here, the woman is the one who does all things: she rocks the baby, she washes him, and she takes care of him. It's true that the husband sometimes takes care of the baby but it's the woman who does more.
> (North, women)

There are small differences to be seen in the men's and women's opinions and justifications. The men expressed more diverse justifications to why women should not take part in politics. According to the men, women do not have the necessary qualities for politics and their pursuing political careers was seen as a threat to the internal balance of the family and the power relations between the man and the woman. A woman's duties were considered to lie at home, not in politics. The men saw the situation from the point of view of traditional gender roles, which might be harmed by the woman's political career.

The women also expressed it very clearly that the man is the head of the family. According to the women, a woman needs her husband's approval to be able to participate in politics. To gain his approval the women had a variety of persuasive measures they could use. Divorce was not seen as liberating but mainly as a threat. However, it must be noted that although the traditional gender roles and practices that rely on them were predominant in the conversations, there were also views that placed a stronger emphasis on women's abilities, rights and liberties and to times changing.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE

How then should the observations presented above be interpreted from the point of view of social representation theory? How does the theory help us understand the results brought up above? How can the theory help us change women's position in this specific context?

Traditional conceptions of women, their roles and their position in society have long held sway in Cameroon. Our focus group interviews clearly showed what we already knew of the centrality of the family in Cameroonian culture. The role of women has the strongest, and sometimes only, positive content in the family context: a good woman is a good wife and mother and her most important duty is to take care of the family. Furthermore, the people we interviewed also referred to social change. Clearly, various conceptions of women exist

simultaneously in Cameroon. Conceptions of women and their roles can be seen as consisting of traditional views entwined with new, even science-based ideas. Social representations theory can therefore be said to be well-suited for studying our subject matter – it helps us to make sense of the discursive entities and emerging arguments and their relationships.

We examined so-called natural groups, i.e. conversations with ordinary people instead of only using the responses of individual persons. These villagers/townspeople share their environment and joys and troubles of everyday life with each other. Usually our interviewees were eager to discuss the dilemmas we presented them with. The dilemmas were current social questions of which they had formed opinions. These observations also support the suitability of the social representation approach to the subject matter (for paradigmatic principles behind the ideal type of research on social representations see Bauer & Gaskell, 1999).

How then are the new conceptions of women and their position anchored in Cameroonian society? What are they connected with? Can we speak of cores of representations? Are these conceptions characteristic to the speech and ideas of some specific group? Can we find any hegemonic, emancipated or polemic representations?

The education of women is considered important, but it clearly does not have a strong target to anchor to. The connection to modernization development, to times changing, is the one that is most evident. Although the concepts of development and modernization are not specifically mentioned, the dynamic discussions of issues such as schooling and modern representative politics, clearly point to the knowledge and integration of those practices in the lives of the interviewees. Our interviewees often made references to changing customs and to the fact that things are different now. On the other hand, modern law was sometimes referred to in interviews although it was not enforced in the interviewee's home village at the time. Changing customs could therefore be anchored to "modern rights". The oppositional pair tradition-modernization can be thought as forming one of the themata that Cameroonian society anchors to today.

On the other hand, our interview material clearly demonstrates how traditional norms and the post colonial gender system maintain the prevailing conceptions of women. Although women's education and preservation of health were considered as important values, women may not go against their parents' will or their husband's desire to have more children. Most Cameroonian men opposed the idea of women participating in politics and even women considered that the husband's consent was needed because the man was considered to be the head of the family - which is also what the Cameroonian law says, as discussed above. The core of the traditional representation of a Cameroonian woman is clearly that of being a mother and a wife. Discussions of all three dilemmas confirmed this finding; women were strongly anchored to motherhood. In that sense, we can talk about a hegemonic representation. Nevertheless, in the interviews we can see the seeds of emancipating and polemic representations as well. The interviewees could state that women should have equal rights and liberties or refer to the times changing, to the declaration of human rights or to the position of women which is now much better, in various ways, than it used to be. However, based on our material, we cannot speak of new representations, because the comments foreshadowing new kinds of representations were somewhat disjointed, though plentiful.

Our interviewees seem to hold a rather clear picture of traditional women's roles that is based on their own life experience and examples from their own environment. People have a clear idea of how this kind of woman looks like and how she behaves. The law also supports

the traditional gender roles giving men a superior status. According to our interviewees, a woman not acting according to traditional models is in danger of becoming a prostitute, which in turn strengthens the images of traditional roles. Moreover, there were not many icons for women politicians but male characteristics clearly dominated the image of the prototypical politician: extroverted and rough. In other words, in Cameroon, there are no clear conceptions or iconic images of what a new, educated and independent woman is like, what roles she has and how her life is organised. In light of our material, prostitutes are the only model or icon for women who work outside home of whom our interviewees had experience which, in turn, hinders the construction of a more positive representation of an independent woman. What is needed is a new and culturally acceptable image of women with more choices in their life than the hegemonic representation has allowed. In other words, the new, more positive image of independent women is still in the making and in the absence of a central core and positive icons for objectification, the representation can not achieve its full potential to improve existing gender relations. As long as there are no positive new images, one of the most efficient incentives for change in everyday life is missing. This is a fact that should be taken into consideration when working with women and to actively search and create new positive images. This is the view that we get from our interviews.

If we turn our attention to Cameroon as a social context we find there some obstacles that are difficult to overcome in a short time span. The political life of Cameroon is a rough play ground, with many risks for everyone entering it: physical confrontations between militants are sometimes fatal, corruption is pervasive, financial costs are very high for candidacy as they were at least doubled for the last elections. (Sindjoun, 2004; Kengne Taalah, 2007). It is not only important to bring into public light examples of women who are in politics, and who have a high esteem in their communities, but also change the way how politics is done in the country.

In light of our interview material it does not seem possible to include the two roles of woman, as a good wife and as a politician, under the same representation of women. When making new public images, it may be important to indicate in a concrete way how women can be good wives and politicians at the same time, with due division of domestic workload within the family and help. It is also important to build an image that it is possible to be a good woman and politician without a family or children. Moreover, regarding husband as a head of the family, the Cameroonian civil law does not support new images of women to be built, and thus to improve gender equality, also a change of laws is needed. However, parental responsibility is nowadays increasingly shared between the couple, improving women's decision-making in family issues. In addition to prejudicial legislation, the tradition of dowry is another practice which serves to maintain the subservient status of women.

Our examination of variation strengthens the ideas of regional differences that are based on the different practices and ideas of ethnic groups concerning men and women's roles. We found differences between villages in South and North Cameroon, among others. Throughout our interview material it seems that North-Cameroonians produce more straightforward justifications based more firmly on tradition, whereas especially women in West and South Cameroon bring up more diverse ideas. The indigenous hegemonic representations of male prevalence were reinforced by the colonial systems of religion, education and wage labour; however, women of the Coastal and Southern areas benefited from urbanisation and schooling. Thus, perhaps in the South and West the core of the representations is not as tight as elsewhere and can take in new material and other elements easier and those elements can

then be applied more flexibly. Examining this idea would require historical research. However, our material does make it clear that the conceptions of women's position in a single country vary so much by group that any work towards a change in views should concentrate on this local knowledge as the starting point. Variations according to area can also be thought to be above all connected to traditional representations, though they may be built around a common core. Modernization, though it takes somewhat different forms in different groups, could be a connecting factor for the social representations of Cameroonians as the other, strong pole of the themata.

Discussions with the Cameroonians we interviewed, both men and women, give us the impression that traditional norms are becoming looser to give room for a new, more varied type of representation of women. As the education dilemma, for example, brings up, poverty serves to maintain traditional practices, such as forced marriage. The interviewees were aware of which social circumstances maintain these practices or what they are relics of. This kind of understanding of meanings is important and may lead to social change.

Based on our interview material it appears that differences between the views of men and women are mostly a question of emphasis. African feminism aspires to improve the position of women by working together with men (e.g. Nnaemaka, 2003; Kassea, 2006) and this is not likely to lead to polemic representations. This is another fact that community psychology should take note of. African feminism acknowledges the pre-colonial practices of the continent and is in agreement with the communal values people still support. On this basis it is possible to start developing new models of action in communities.

The social representation theory helps us to understand how the new ideas challenge the old ones, how they are adjusted, adopted and used in the communities, and what new ideas can be used to enhance the change on the one hand and what clear obstacles there seem to be for the change on the other hand.

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