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Impact of Psychosocial Factors on the Career Development of Working Women: Implications for Counselling in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of psychosocial factors on the career development of working women and its implications for counselling in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. It examined four factors: social identity, self-image, communication strategies and educational status. The study was guided by Holland's theory of career choice (1959), Ginzberg et al.'s theory of career development (1951), Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968), the Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, 2005) and Super's life-span, life-space theory. The correlational survey design was used. From a target population of 390 working women and 28 employers in government, lay private and denominational institutions, a sample of 300 working women and 15 employers was drawn using purposive and simple random sampling. Data were collected with a 40-item questionnaire and an interview guide. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistics, the Pearson product-moment correlation and multiple linear regression; qualitative data were analysed thematically. Social identity ($r = .180$, $p = .002$) and communication strategies ($r = .213$, $p < .001$) were significantly and positively related to career development, while self-image ($r = .112$, $p = .053$) and education ($r = .111$, $p = .055$) were not. Together, the four factors explained a small but significant share of the variance in career development ($R^2 = .065$, $F(4, 295) = 5.149$, $p = .001$), with communication strategies the only significant unique predictor ($\beta = .161$, $p = .010$). The study proposes three counselling modules: a gender-sensitive career counselling framework, communication and resilience-building workshops, and an institutional advocacy strategy for Fako Division.

Keywords: Psychosocial Factors, Career Development, Working Women, Social Identity, Self-Image, Communication Strategies, Educational Status, Counselling

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1. Introduction

Career development is the lifelong process through which individuals manage their learning, work and personal growth to advance in their careers (Patton & McMahon, 2001). It involves self-awareness, exploring options, making informed decisions and acting on them. Super's (1990) life-span, life-space theory presents it as a series of stages (growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement), each with its own tasks. Holland (1997) adds that career satisfaction and stability depend on the fit between a person's personality and the work environment. For women, career development cannot be understood through education and skills alone. It is shaped by an interplay of internal psychological processes and external social systems. Psychosocial factors are the social, psychological and behavioural factors that influence an individual's well-being (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). Among them, gender stereotypes and implicit bias create "glass ceilings" that limit women's access to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). When these barriers are internalized, they lower women's self-efficacy and aspirations, an effect known as stereotype threat (Steele, 1997).

Women also carry a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving work. This work–family conflict is a source of stress and often leads to compromises, career interruptions or a preference for flexibility over advancement (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Social support from mentors, sponsors and peers provides guidance and psychological affirmation (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), while its absence hinders progression. Women's career development is therefore a psychosocial negotiation, in which personal agency interacts with gendered social structures and expectations.

Statement of the Problem

In an equitable society, a working woman's career would reflect her competencies, aspirations, qualifications and efforts. Workplace culture, family support, social norms and self-efficacy would act as catalysts for growth, and counselling services would be ready to address the challenges women face. The reality for many working women in Fako Division is different. Preliminary observations suggest that they contend with gender-based occupational stereotypes, social expectations that prioritise domestic roles, workplace discrimination and harassment, a lack of mentorship and the pressure of work–life imbalance. These factors create barriers that hinder career advancement, job satisfaction and professional well-being. The consequences are career stagnation, stress, low self-esteem and economic dependency for women; loss of talent and less diverse leadership for organisations; and persistent gender inequality for society.

Research on psychosocial factors in women's careers has concentrated on Western and some Asian contexts. Studies in Cameroon have addressed gender issues broadly but have not examined which psychosocial factors most influence the career development of working women in Fako Division, nor linked them to counselling practice. This study therefore investigated four psychosocial factors (social identity, self-image, communication strategies and educational status) and their impact on the career development of working women, and proposed context-specific counselling interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective was to examine the impact of psychosocial factors on the career development of working women and its implications for counselling in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Ascertain the extent to which the social identity of working women impacts their career development.
2. Determine the extent to which the self-image of working women impacts their career development.
3. Examine the extent to which the communication strategies of working women impact their career development.
4. Determine the extent to which the educational status of working women impacts their career development.

Hypotheses

Ho: Psychosocial factors do not significantly impact the career development of working women in Fako Division.

- **Ho_1:** Social identity does not significantly impact the career development of working women.
- **Ho_2:** Self-image does not significantly impact the career development of working women.
- **Ho_3:** Communication strategies do not significantly impact the career development of working women.
- **Ho_4:** Educational status does not significantly impact the career development of working women.

Despite the gains of the women's movement, sexism and gender inequity remain major concerns in the workplace. Being a woman brings additional barriers such as the glass ceiling, hostile work environments and discrimination, while early socialisation narrows the work girls see as appropriate for their gender (Gottfredson, 2005). In Cameroon, women make up about half of the population, yet they remain concentrated in informal, low-paying and vulnerable employment. In Fako Division, home to the urban centres of Limbe and Buea, the Anglophone crisis has added displacement, economic disruption and new risks of gender-based violence, often leaving women as primary breadwinners. How these conditions interact with psychosocial factors in shaping women's careers has received little research attention.

Background

Historically, in most pre-industrial societies women's work in food production, clothing and child-rearing was essential to survival but unpaid and treated as an extension of their domestic role. Industrialization drew women into factories, yet the ideology of "separate spheres" cast men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Hollingworth (1916) argued that this division of labour was based on social order rather than science, and that women should also receive career guidance. Early career interest inventories reflected these biases: the Carnegie and Strong inventories had separate male and female versions, with fewer career options for women. Only in 1974 did the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory drop separate gender booklets (Harrington & Long, 2013). In Africa, pre-colonial women were central economic actors as farmers, traders and craftswomen. Colonial administrations dealt mainly with men, issued land titles and cash-crop contracts to men, and reclassified women as dependants. After independence, a small elite of educated women entered teaching, nursing and the civil service, while most women moved into the informal economy, especially after the economic crises and structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. In sub-Saharan Africa, women still carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid care work than men (ILO, 2016).

Cameroon follows this broader pattern. Among the Bamileke, Bamoun and Grassfields peoples, women held vital roles in agriculture, crafts and trade. Colonial cash-crop production on plantations privileged male wage labour and sidelined women from credit, education and land. After the oil crisis of the mid-1980s, women's economic activity became essential to family survival, and the *bayam-sellam* (market trader) economy expanded. Female employment stood at 45.3% of total employment in 2018 (ILO, 2018).

Review of Literature

Conceptually, a career is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur et al., 1989). It has an objective side (salary, promotions, position) and a subjective side (satisfaction, meaning, work–life balance), and women tend to weigh the subjective side more heavily (Abele & Spurk, 2009). Astin (1984) proposed that women's careers should be described separately from men's, through four constructs: work motivation, work expectations, sex-role socialisation and the structure of opportunity. Social identity refers to the part of the self-concept derived from group membership, including gender (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Self-image is how a woman perceives her behaviour, abilities and characteristics. Communication serves the functions of control, motivation, emotional expression and information in an organisation. Education provides knowledge, credentials and self-efficacy, but its benefits may be weakened when social identity is negative or self-image poor (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Theoretically, the study was guided by five theories. Holland's (1959) theory of career choice holds that people seek work environments that let them use their skills and express their attitudes and values. Ginzberg et al.'s (1951) theory presents occupational choice as a developmental process that passes through fantasy, tentative and realistic periods and involves compromise. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory describes eight stages, each with a central conflict, and stresses the role of social relationships in forming identity. The Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, 2005) examines the fit between the person and the work environment, with job satisfaction and performance determining tenure. Super's life-span, life-space theory views career development as the implementation of a self-concept across life roles (Super, 1980).

Contextually, working women in Cameroon face gender-based discrimination, limited access to training and weak enforcement of equality laws. The Labour Code provides for equal pay and non-discrimination, but these provisions are not consistently applied (ILO, 2019). Most women's careers unfold in the informal sector, while educated women in formal employment still face a glass ceiling, patriarchal norms and a "double burden" of paid and domestic work. In Fako Division, these pressures have been compounded by the socio-political crisis in the Anglophone regions.

Methodology

The study used the correlational survey design, which examines relationships between variables without manipulating them. Quantitative data from a questionnaire for working women were complemented by qualitative data from interviews with employers. The population comprised all working women and employers in government, lay private and denominational institutions in Fako Division, estimated at 555 workers and 35 employers. The target and accessible population comprised 390 working women and 28 employers in operational, authorised institutions. The sample size was determined following Mugenda and Mugenda (2003). Fako Division and the institutions were selected purposively, given that the ongoing crisis affected the functioning of institutions in the region. Working women who answered the questionnaire were selected by simple random sampling. Table 1 presents the population and sample.

Table 1: Population and Sample of the Study

Institution	Target workers	Target employers	Sampled workers	Sampled employers
Government	200	12	150	5
Lay private	130	9	100	5
Denominational	60	7	50	5
Total	**390**	**28**	**300**	**15**

A questionnaire was designed for working women. Section A collected demographic data (employment sector, age and years of work). Section B contained 40 closed-ended items in five sub-sections of eight items each: social identity (adapted from the Feminist Identity Development Scale), self-image (adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), communication strategies, women's education and career development. Items used a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), scored 4 to 1 for positively worded items and reversed for negatively worded items. One open-ended question asked about respondents' work progression over the years. An interview guide was used with employers to obtain in-depth information on women's career development in their institutions. Interviews were recorded on a mobile phone and a tape recorder. Data were entered in EpiData 3.0 and exported to SPSS version 27 for cleaning and analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and multiple response sets) summarised responses. Means were interpreted as very low (1.00–1.99), low (2.00–2.49), moderate (2.50–2.99), high (3.00–3.49) and very high (3.50–4.00). The specific hypotheses were tested with the Pearson product-moment correlation, and the general hypothesis with multiple linear regression, at the .05 level of significance. Normality was checked with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically with the support of Atlas.ti, with themes emerging from participants' statements. Administrative approval was obtained from the Faculty of Education, University of Buea, and authorisation from the head of each institution. Verbal consent was sought from every participant, participation was voluntary, and those unwilling to take part were not pressured. Responses were treated confidentially, and no names or identifying details were recorded.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents: **Most respondents (55.0%) worked in government institutions, 27.0% in private institutions and 18.0% in confessional institutions. The largest age group was 41–50 years (31.7%), and about two thirds (60.7%) were aged 31–50. Nearly half (46.3%) had ten years of work experience or less.**

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)

Indicator	Category	n	%
Employment sector	Government	165	55.0
	Private	81	27.0
	Confessional	54	18.0
Age	20–30 years	71	23.7
	31–40 years	87	29.0
	41–50 years	95	31.7
	51 years and above	47	15.7
Years of work	1–5	94	31.3
	6–10	45	15.0
	11–15	36	12.0
	16–20	20	6.7
	21–25	14	4.7
	26–30	13	4.3
	Above 30	13	4.3

Career Development of Working Women

Overall, 82.5% of responses agreed with the career development statements, and the overall mean of 3.07 (SD = 0.761) is in the high band (Table 3). Most women felt encouraged to learn new skills (90.3%) and confident in their ability to advance (89.7%). The weakest areas were regular performance feedback (M = 2.92), organisational support for career growth (M = 2.94) and having a mentor (M = 2.95), where between a fifth and a quarter of the women disagreed.

Table 3: Working Women's Career Development

Item	SA	A	D	SD	SA & A	Mean	SD
I have a clear career development plan	88 (29.3%)	171 (57.0%)	35 (11.7%)	6 (2.0%)	259 (86.3%)	3.14	.688
My organisation supports my career growth	70 (23.3%)	165 (55.0%)	42 (14.0%)	23 (7.7%)	235 (78.3%)	2.94	.824
I have access to training and development opportunities	81 (27.0%)	151 (50.3%)	55 (18.3%)	13 (4.3%)	232 (77.3%)	3.00	.793
I receive regular feedback on my performance	65 (21.7%)	161 (53.7%)	58 (19.3%)	16 (5.3%)	226 (75.3%)	2.92	.786
I feel encouraged to pursue new skills and knowledge	118 (39.3%)	153 (51.0%)	20 (6.7%)	9 (3.0%)	271 (90.3%)	3.27	.715
I have a mentor who supports my career development	75 (25.0%)	156 (52.0%)	47 (15.7%)	22 (7.3%)	231 (77.0%)	2.95	.836
I feel confident in my ability to advance in my career	125 (41.7%)	144 (48.0%)	25 (8.3%)	6 (2.0%)	269 (89.7%)	3.29	.704
I believe my organisation values employee career development	88 (29.3%)	170 (56.7%)	29 (9.7%)	13 (4.3%)	258 (86.0%)	3.11	.744
MRS / overall mean	**710 (29.6%)**	**1271 (53.0%)**	**311 (13.0%)**	**108 (4.5%)**	**1981 (82.5%)**	**3.07**	**.761**

Social Identity

Overall, 76.9% of responses agreed with the social identity items (M = 3.04, SD = 0.797, high). The women identify strongly with family roles, with 87.3% feeling most fulfilled as wives and mothers, while 92.0% work to improve women's status. Close to half did not want equal status with men (46.0%) and were angry at having let men take advantage of them (48.7%), which points to ambivalence about gender equality.

Table 4: Social Identity of Working Women

Item	SA	A	D	SD	SA & A	Mean	SD
I associate with everyone at the workplace	141 (47.0%)	135 (45.0%)	20 (6.7%)	4 (1.3%)	276 (92.0%)	3.38	.671
I work to improve women's status	115 (38.3%)	161 (53.7%)	22 (7.3%)	2 (0.7%)	276 (92.0%)	3.30	.630
I feel most fulfilled being a wife and mother	150 (50.0%)	112 (37.3%)	33 (11.0%)	5 (1.7%)	262 (87.3%)	3.36	.742
I feel that some men are sensitive to women's issues	91 (30.3%)	194 (64.7%)	11 (3.7%)	4 (1.3%)	285 (95.0%)	3.24	.580
I care very deeply about men and women having equal opportunities	155 (51.7%)	87 (29.0%)	29 (9.7%)	29 (9.7%)	242 (80.7%)	3.33	.823
I do not want to have equal status with men	44 (14.7%)	94 (31.3%)	82 (27.3%)	80 (26.7%)	138 (46.0%)	2.34	1.027
I tend to be careful when I interact with men	77 (25.7%)	144 (48.0%)	65 (21.7%)	14 (4.7%)	221 (73.7%)	2.95	.812
I am angry that I have let men take advantage of me	65 (21.7%)	81 (27.0%)	77 (25.7%)	77 (25.7%)	146 (48.7%)	2.45	1.094
MRS / overall mean	**838 (34.9%)**	**1008 (42.0%)**	**339 (14.1%)**	**215 (9.0%)**	**1846 (76.9%)**	**3.04**	**.797**

Employers described training and seminars as the main career development opportunities, and named competition, conflict, gossip and domestic workload as challenges. One noted that women "have a lot of challenges… work at home", and several called for continual education and for listening to women's challenges.

Self-Image

The overall mean was 2.60 (SD = 0.896, moderate), but this combines positively and negatively worded items. The women strongly endorsed positive statements, such as taking a positive attitude towards themselves (M = 3.43) and feeling a person of worth (M = 3.35), and rejected negative ones, such as feeling a failure (M = 1.65). Pockets of self-doubt remained: 37.0% sometimes think they are no good at all, and 73.7% wish they had more respect for themselves.

Table 5: Self-Image of Working Women

Item	SA	A	D	SD	SA & A	Mean	SD
I am able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself	98 (32.7%)	153 (51.0%)	43 (14.3%)	6 (2.0%)	251 (83.7%)	3.14	.729
At times I think I am no good at all	44 (14.7%)	67 (22.3%)	89 (29.7%)	100 (33.3%)	111 (37.0%)	2.16	1.044
I feel that I am a person of worth	157 (52.3%)	110 (36.7%)	15 (5.0%)	18 (6.0%)	267 (89.0%)	3.35	.831
I certainly feel useless at times	17 (5.7%)	54 (18.0%)	96 (32.0%)	133 (44.3%)	71 (23.7%)	1.85	.911
I am not able to do things as well as most other people	29 (9.7%)	97 (32.3%)	103 (34.3%)	71 (23.7%)	126 (42.0%)	2.28	.933
I wish I could have more respect for myself	94 (31.3%)	127 (42.3%)	45 (15.0%)	34 (11.3%)	221 (73.7%)	2.94	.957
I take a positive attitude towards myself	180 (60.0%)	85 (28.3%)	18 (6.0%)	17 (5.7%)	265 (88.3%)	3.43	.841
I am inclined to think that I am a failure	20 (6.7%)	34 (11.3%)	68 (22.7%)	178 (59.3%)	54 (18.0%)	1.65	.925
MRS / overall mean	**639 (26.6%)**	**727 (30.3%)**	**477 (19.9%)**	**557 (23.2%)**	**1366 (56.9%)**	**2.60**	**.896**

Employers described the women as resilient, resourceful and creative role models, though some felt unequal because of differences in education. Domestic responsibilities were again named as the main challenge.

Communication Strategies

The overall mean was 2.82 (SD = 0.828, moderate), again combining positive and negative items. The women largely use open, collaborative communication: they keep an open mind when listening (M = 3.50), invite others to participate (M = 3.35) and consult their superiors when in doubt (M = 3.40). At the same time, 87.3% avoid disclosing information that might suggest weakness, and 26.7% deal with people while still angry.

Table 6: Communication Strategies of Working Women

Item	SA	A	D	SD	SA & A	Mean	SD
I avoid disclosing personal information that might suggest weakness	153 (51.0%)	109 (36.3%)	27 (9.0%)	11 (3.7%)	262 (87.3%)	3.35	.793
I do not employ a collaborative interaction style	28 (9.3%)	65 (21.7%)	130 (43.3%)	77 (25.7%)	93 (31.0%)	2.15	.910
I keep an open mind when listening to what others have to say	179 (59.7%)	101 (33.7%)	12 (4.0%)	8 (2.7%)	280 (93.3%)	3.50	.701
I invite others to participate and encourage them to elaborate	138 (46.0%)	138 (46.0%)	15 (5.0%)	9 (3.0%)	276 (92.0%)	3.35	.714
I do not listen to any other opinion when speaking	22 (7.3%)	29 (9.7%)	95 (31.7%)	154 (51.3%)	51 (17.0%)	1.73	.913
When helping others, I identify the key issues to be addressed	111 (37.0%)	145 (48.3%)	20 (6.7%)	24 (8.0%)	256 (85.3%)	3.14	.859
When someone makes me angry, I deal with them while still angry	32 (10.7%)	48 (16.0%)	95 (31.7%)	125 (41.7%)	80 (26.7%)	1.96	1.002
I always consult my boss when in doubt	156 (52.0%)	115 (38.3%)	21 (7.0%)	8 (2.7%)	271 (90.3%)	3.40	.736
MRS / overall mean	**819 (34.1%)**	**750 (31.2%)**	**415 (17.2%)**	**416 (17.3%)**	**1569 (65.4%)**	**2.82**	**.828**

Employers reported face-to-face, phone and message-based communication, and seminars on using communication skills appropriately. They called for continuous education, refresher courses and equipment.

Women's Education

Overall, 74.6% of responses agreed with the education items (M = 3.02, SD = 0.787, high). The women believe strongly that advanced degrees increase promotion chances (M = 3.59) and that more educational opportunities improve career outcomes (M = 3.56). Most rejected family barriers to further study, yet 31.0% did not want to study while their children were young and 27.0% reported that their husbands did not want them to further their education.

Table 7: Working Women's Education

Item	SA	A	D	SD	SA & A	Mean	SD
Advanced degrees increase women's chances for promotion	199 (66.3%)	84 (28.0%)	13 (4.3%)	4 (1.3%)	283 (94.3%)	3.59	.640
More educational opportunities for women lead to better career outcomes	185 (61.7%)	103 (34.3%)	7 (2.3%)	5 (1.7%)	288 (96.0%)	3.56	.628
I have faced fewer challenges in my career due to my educational level	92 (30.7%)	156 (52.0%)	39 (13.0%)	13 (4.3%)	248 (82.7%)	3.09	.777
Societal expectations of women's education have changed positively	149 (49.7%)	135 (45.0%)	11 (3.7%)	5 (1.7%)	284 (94.7%)	3.43	.648
Women with lower education face more career obstacles	153 (51.0%)	105 (35.0%)	27 (9.0%)	15 (5.0%)	258 (86.0%)	3.32	.837
Networking during my education has helped my career	123 (41.0%)	132 (44.0%)	30 (10.0%)	15 (5.0%)	255 (85.0%)	3.21	.817
I do not want to go to school while my children are still young	22 (7.3%)	71 (23.7%)	93 (31.0%)	114 (38.0%)	93 (31.0%)	2.00	.956
My husband does not want me to further my education	27 (9.0%)	54 (18.0%)	86 (28.7%)	133 (44.3%)	81 (27.0%)	1.92	.990
MRS / overall mean	**950 (39.6%)**	**840 (35.0%)**	**306 (12.8%)**	**304 (12.7%)**	**1790 (74.6%)**	**3.02**	**.787**

Employers saw education as empowering and gave examples of women who rose through further study, including a cleaner who obtained Ordinary Level, Advanced Level and a degree and was promoted to senior staff. They also observed that single women have more opportunities than married women. In the open-ended question, many women reported growth ("I was employed as a clerk but today I am the communication and public relations manager of the CDC"), while others reported "no promotion at work yet".

Verification of Hypotheses

Normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) showed small departures from normality for all five variables (Shapiro-Wilk W = .966 to .983). With n = 300, the Pearson correlation and least-squares regression are robust to such departures, so parametric tests were retained; results near the .05 threshold are interpreted with caution.

Table 8: Correlations Between Psychosocial Factors and Career Development (n = 300)

Hypothesis	Psychosocial factor	r	p	r^2	Decision
Ho_1	Social identity	.180**	.002	.032	Rejected
Ho_2	Self-image	.112	.053	.013	Retained
Ho_3	Communication strategies	.213**	< .001	.045	Rejected
Ho_4	Women's education	.111	.055	.012	Retained

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Social identity and communication strategies had weak but significant positive relationships with career development, so Ho_1 and Ho_3 were rejected. Self-image and education were not significantly related to career development, so Ho_2 and Ho_4 were retained.

Table 9: Multiple Regression of Career Development on Psychosocial Factors

Predictor	B	Std. error	β	t	p
(Constant)	11.351	3.091		3.673	< .001
Social identity	.173	.088	.118	1.971	.050
Self-image	.025	.082	.019	.302	.763
Communication strategies	.264	.101	.161	2.606	.010
Women's education	.107	.090	.069	1.187	.236

$R^2 = .065$; adjusted $R^2 = .053$; $F(4, 295) = 5.149$; $p = .001$. The four factors together explained 6.5% of the variance in career development, and the model was significant, so the general null hypothesis (Ho) was rejected. Communication strategies were the only significant unique predictor ($\beta = .161$, $p = .010$). Social identity was a borderline unique predictor ($p = .050$), as part of its relationship with career development is shared with communication strategies. About 93.5% of the variation in career development lies in factors outside the model, such as organisational policies, mentoring, family responsibilities and the socio-political situation.

Discussion

Social identity and career development: Social identity was significantly and positively related to career development ($r = .180$, $p = .002$), though its unique effect was borderline once the other factors were controlled ($\beta = .118$, $p = .050$). Nearly all respondents (92.0%) associate with everyone at work, suggesting that working women in Fako Division build diverse professional networks. This supports Hamilton (2006), whose model shows a reciprocal relationship between a woman's identity and her social network in shaping decisions to stay in or leave a career. Scheepers, Douman and Moodley (2018) similarly found that sponsorship and developmental support help women advance to senior levels, and that women who were supported tend to support others in turn. The women's commitment to improving women's status echoes Diekmann (2015), who found that feminist-identified women draw on communities of support and mentor other women. Yates (2017) likewise showed that salient possible selves are moderately related to career goals and motivation, and Wang (2009) found that career identity leads to distinct forms of career development among teachers in China and the Netherlands. Yet close to half of the women in Fako expressed ambivalence about equal status with men or anger at having been taken advantage of. This reflects Erikson's (1968) view that identity is negotiated within social relationships and cultural expectations: women's identities as wives and mothers coexist with professional ambitions, and the tension between them can either fuel self-advocacy or encourage withdrawal.

Self-image and career development. Self-image was not significantly related to career development ($r = .112$, $p = .053$) and made virtually no unique contribution in the regression ($\beta = .019$, $p = .763$). This is notable because the women reported a generally positive self-image, with 83.7% believing they achieve most of their goals. The finding contrasts with Osei-Tutu (2023), who found self-esteem to be a significant determinant of career decision-making and satisfaction among working women in Ghana's Volta Region, and with Sun (2003), who showed that self-objectification lowers self-esteem, career decision-making self-efficacy and aspirations. It also departs from the expectation that self-efficacy drives career pursuit (Betz & Hackett, 1981; Taylor & Betz, 1983).

One explanation is that in Fako Division, career progression depends more on external conditions (promotion systems, mentorship, networks and family demands) than on how women see themselves. A positive self-image alone does not translate into advancement where structural barriers remain. Even so, the 37.0% who sometimes feel they are no good at all show that self-doubt persists, which matters for counselling because it can discourage career risk-taking (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Communication strategies and career development. Communication strategies were the strongest correlate of career development ($r = .213$, $p < .001$) and the only significant unique predictor ($B = 0.264$, $\beta = .161$, $p = .010$). Women who listen openly, collaborate and consult their superiors tend to report greater career development. This is consistent with Weinberg (2014), who found that gendered communication styles have distinct effects on

career outcomes, with collaborative styles linked to both hierarchical and non-hierarchical rewards. It also agrees with Mukelabai (2021), who showed that effective communication enhances collaboration and organisational performance, and with Chilufya (2019), who found that varied and inclusive communication fosters respect and inclusion in diverse workforces.

The finding that 87.3% of the women avoid disclosing information that might suggest weakness indicates a protective strategy, which may reflect an effort to project confidence in a gendered workplace. In the light of the Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, 2005), communication is a key means by which a worker signals her competence to the employer and negotiates the fit between her needs and the organisation's requirements. That over a quarter of the women deal with people while still angry points to a need for support in conflict and emotion management.

Education and career development. Education was not significantly related to career development ($r = .111$, $p = .055$; $\beta = .069$, $p = .236$), even though 94.3% of the women believe that advanced degrees improve promotion chances. This contrasts with Yıldırım, Yıldırım and Çoltu (2019), who found that education significantly improved the careers, income and promotion opportunities of working women in Turkey. It aligns with critiques that education, while necessary, is not sufficient to overcome entrenched gender inequalities (Blau & DeVaro, 2007; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). In Fako Division, limited openings, the under-representation of women in decision-making and family constraints may reduce the returns on women's qualifications. Employers' observation that single women have more opportunities than married women support this interpretation, as does Super's (1980) view that career development unfolds across competing life roles.

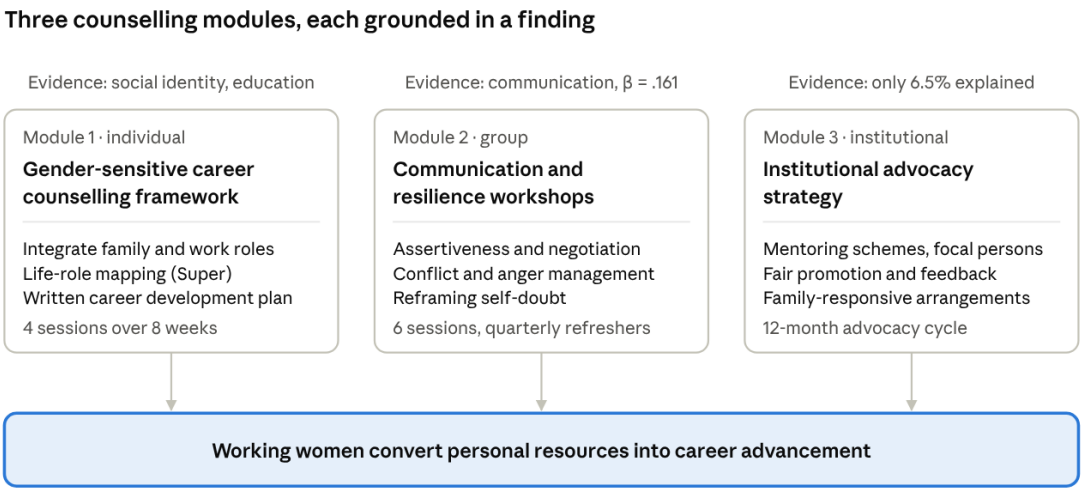
Combined effect. Together, the four factors explained only 6.5% of the variance in career development. Psychosocial factors therefore matter, but most of the variation in women's careers lies in workplace and family conditions. Counselling that targets individual confidence alone is unlikely to be enough; it must also strengthen communication skills and change the institutional conditions that allow women to convert personal resources into advancement.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of psychosocial factors on the career development of working women in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon. Social identity and communication strategies were significantly related to career development, while self-image and education were not. Together, the four factors explained a small but significant share (6.5%) of the variance in career development, with communication strategies the strongest and only significant unique predictor. Three conclusions follow. First, a strong and inclusive social identity, built through workplace networks and support for other women, is linked to career growth, so organisations should foster networking, mentorship and sponsorship. Second, a positive self-image and high regard for education do not by themselves translate into advancement; their value depends on fair promotion systems, mentorship and relief from family constraints. Third, communication is the most important psychosocial lever: women who communicate openly, collaboratively and constructively are better placed to gain visibility and advance.

To translate these findings into practice, the study proposes a three-module counselling model for working women in Fako Division. The modules can be delivered by workplace and school guidance counsellors, human resource units, the Divisional Delegation of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, and the counselling services of the University of Buea.

Figure 1: Proposed counselling model for working women in Fako Division



Modules 1 and 2 work with the individual woman; Module 3 changes the workplace conditions that account for most of the variation in careers.

Module 1: Gender-Sensitive Career Counselling Framework. Grounded in the social identity and education findings, this module helps women integrate their family and professional identities, question internalised stereotypes and convert qualifications into promotion targets. It comprises four individual sessions of about 60 minutes over eight weeks: an intake assessment with the study's scales, life-role mapping
based on Super's life-span, life-space approach, culturally adapted use of Holland's interest typology, and a written career development plan, followed by a six-month review. Priority goes to women in their first ten years of service (46.3% of the sample) and women returning from maternity leave.

Module 2: Communication and Resilience-Building Workshops. Grounded in the finding that communication strategies are the strongest predictor, this module runs six fortnightly two-hour sessions for mixed groups of 15 to 20 women from different institutions. The sessions cover assertive communication, voicing career goals and negotiating for promotion or training, managing anger and conflict, restructuring self-doubt with cognitive-behavioural techniques, building professional networks, and a personal action plan with peer-support pairs. Quarterly refresher sessions follow, as employers requested.

Module 3: Institutional Advocacy Strategy. Because individual factors explained only 6.5% of the variance, this module targets workplace conditions over a twelve-month cycle. It involves briefing institutions and designating a women's career development focal person, setting up formal mentoring schemes, advocating transparent promotion criteria and feedback at least twice a year, promoting family-responsive arrangements such as training within working hours, holding an annual Fako Division forum, and establishing referral pathways for women affected by gender-based violence and the socio-political crisis.

The three modules are complementary: Module 1 works with each woman's identity and career plan, Module 2 builds the communication skills the data identify as the strongest lever, and Module 3 changes the institutional conditions that account for most of the differences in women's careers. Each module should be evaluated with pre- and post-intervention measures.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Organisations and human resource units should institutionalise structured networking, mentoring and sponsorship schemes so that every woman who wants a mentor has one, and should provide regular performance feedback and transparent promotion criteria.

Employers and training institutions should integrate communication skills training (assertiveness, negotiation, conflict management and collaboration) into professional development programmes for women.

Counsellors should adopt the proposed three-module model and combine work on self-image with practical career planning and institutional advocacy, rather than relying on confidence-building alone.

The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family should prioritise programmes that enhance women's training and awareness and should support family-responsive workplace policies, so that education translates into career advancement.

Organisations should expand women's access to advanced degrees and professional development through scholarships and flexible postgraduate programmes, paired with reforms that address workplace bias. Researchers should extend the study to other divisions and regions of Cameroon, use longitudinal and intervention designs, and examine the mediating role of organisational culture, mentorship and family responsibilities.

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