

Global Solidarity Retreat

with Caroline M Berinyuy, PhD

Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) in Cameroon

March 11-13, 2016; ongoing solidarity 2016 and beyond

Young Women Leaders' Program (YWLP) Cameroon: Background



Women's Day in Kumbo

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The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) in Cameroon

The YWLP in Cameroon is an adaptation of a researched based mentoring program at the University of Virginia, US that pairs college women or *big sisters* with middle school girls or *little sisters* for a year to boost self-esteem and leadership skills development for both groups. The YWLP in Cameroon operates with high school girls as big sisters to their middle or secondary school little sisters. YWLP is an afterschool program in twelve secondary/high schools. The YWLP recognizes that adolescence is a difficult period for girls as this period is absent from most Cameroon cultures. The absence of a notion of adolescence means that maturity is based on physical changes such as the development of breasts which means that the transition is often abrupt with little consideration for their psycho-social states of the girls. The YWLP in Cameroon also recognizes the 'globalizing effect' on adolescent behavior. It employs the concept of 'intelligent borrowing' from one culture to another in this case, borrowing from

the US culture that is more 'informed' on adolescent development and adapting the knowledge in a culturally sensitive ways to address some of the issues facing adolescent girls in Cameroon. The purpose is to make leaders of the girls who can take control of their own lives enabling them to stay in school longer among other things. Its objective is to provide a safe space where adolescent girls can bring their problems, especially those they are uncomfortable talking to their parents about, and receive support from their big sisters who have just gone through adolescence themselves. The YWLP provides space where girls can learn to recognize and avoid dangerous situations as well as learn from the experiences of other girls. The YWLP also provides an opportunity for girls to bond with older girls and with girls from other ethnicities and regions and religions in order to promote respect for diversity. The ultimate goal is to help the adolescent girls to be leaders in their own lives; to feel comfortable with their changing bodies, to recognize and enhance their confidence and self-worth, improve their hygiene and nutritional knowledge and their academic potential so they can avoid risky behaviors that could lead to health problems or cause them to drop out of school. The day to day activities are organized in form of a curriculum that has been organized into sessions to address each aspect of the psycho-social challenges associated with adolescent development. Our curriculum has been borrowed and used to inform such programs as Seed4Africa in Ethiopia and YWLP Zambia.

We have four foundational goals.

1. Promoting the education of girls

YWLP Cameroon was founded to keep girls in school longer and continues to stress the importance of education. We strive to make the school environment user friendly for the average girls. We provide 'sanitation buckets' for such emergencies as a first period or soiled uniforms during menstruation and counsel on sexual harassment in the school grounds. We ensure the academic follow-up and support in math and science through the female coordinators who are teachers in the schools. The scholarship program an addition to YWLP Cameroon through the initiative of little sisters and individual groups in the US, specifically in Charlottesville, VA have increased program impact. With these scholarships we were able to send two girls from the Islamic High School to college who have since graduated. One of the girls from the nomadic Mbororo minority is the pride of her people as she is the first community member to attend college. Some of our scholarship alumnae have attended short-termed training and are now nurses and elementary school teachers.

2. Capacity recognition and enhancement

We provide opportunities for participants to showcase their emergency leadership skills. High school girls in Kumbo run the program and once a year they run a workshop on some identified issue facing girls. The girls have become confident and eloquent as public speakers and their skills are now recognized by the larger community. We provide opportunities for girls to acquire other skills such as using information technologies. We bring guest speakers from diverse background to keep the participants grounded on the emerging professions.



Photo story workshop, Kumbo & Dschang

3. Community Outreach

In recognition of the mother's crucial role in adolescent development, our workshop titled *Bring Your Mother to the YWLP* looks at the cultural and emotional challenges to communication between girls and their mothers and provide a platform for mothers and daughters to begin to dialogue. We also identify and honor the 'elders' or trail blazers in the community by recognizing and showcasing their contributions to the advancement of the cause of women in the community and in the country at large.



4. Recognition and Celebration of Diversity

In a country as diverse as Cameroon with more than 250 ethnicities and languages and a political heritage that has resulted in the use of English and French as official languages, YWLP Cameroon has striven to be as inclusive as possible of this diversity. The YWLP in Cameroon operates as a bilingual program in English and French. The program is located in the Francophone part of the country in the Lycee Classique which is all French and in the Lycee Bilingue where instruction is in English and French. In Kumbo, the YWLP has responded to the local diversity as well. Schools in the program include an Islamic school, five public schools, one Baptist and two Catholic schools. Girls come from all ethnic backgrounds and YWLP celebrations such as the *Cameroon Girls' Day*, ensure that they continue to mix and mingle and learn from one another. Our program is inclusive of girls with disabilities and those on the margins such as albinos. This way, stereotypes are broken down among participants and through them in the larger society.



Cameroon Girls' Day

