

Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics, and Women's Leadership in Cameroon: A Qualitative Empirical Study

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Abstract— This qualitative empirical study examines how corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical leadership influence women's leadership experiences in Cameroon. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 women leaders. Drawing on peer-reviewed empirical studies, policy documents, and recent literature, the review examines how CSR initiatives and ethical leadership practices influence women's participation, advancement, and effectiveness in leadership roles across public, private, and educational organizations. The findings indicate that organizations integrating CSR into their strategic management practices are more likely to foster ethical cultures characterized by accountability, transparency, fairness, stakeholder engagement, and gender equality. Such environments enhance women's opportunities to develop leadership competencies, participate in decision-making, and contribute to organizational performance and sustainable development. The review further reveals that ethical leadership strengthens employee trust, organizational commitment, and responsible decision-making while reducing workplace discrimination and inequalities. Despite these benefits, women in Cameroon continue to encounter structural barriers, including cultural stereotypes, gender bias, limited access to leadership positions, and inadequate institutional support. These challenges hinder the full realization of CSR objectives and ethical governance. The study concludes that CSR and ethical leadership are complementary mechanisms for advancing women's leadership and organizational effectiveness. It recommends strengthening CSR policies, institutionalizing ethical leadership training, promoting gender-inclusive governance, implementing transparent promotion systems, and establishing mentoring and capacity-building programs for women leaders. These measures will support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Keywords— Corporate social responsibility, ethical leadership, women's leadership, gender equality, organizational ethics, sustainable development, Cameroon.

I. INTRODUCTION

CSR, ethics, and leadership have become central pillars of contemporary organizational success in an era defined by sustainability concerns, stakeholder pressure, and demands for social legitimacy. Traditionally, organizations were viewed primarily as economic entities whose core objective was profit maximization. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that organizations are social institutions with obligations that extend beyond shareholders to employees, communities, governments, consumers, and the natural environment. In this regard, CSR refers to the voluntary and strategic integration of social, environmental, and economic concerns into business operations and stakeholder relationships. Recent studies show that CSR is no longer a peripheral public-relations activity but a strategic governance mechanism that shapes organizational legitimacy, reputation, employee commitment, and long-term sustainability (Wang et al., 2024; Ndong Ntoutoume, 2023). Closely linked to CSR is organizational ethics, which concerns the moral principles, values, and standards that guide behavior, decision-making, and accountability in institutions. Ethics influences how organizations treat workers, respond to communities, manage resources, and exercise power. Ethical organizations are expected to demonstrate fairness, integrity, transparency, respect for human dignity, and accountability in both internal and external operations. Ayoko (2022)

emphasizes that leadership, ethics, and CSR are mutually reinforcing, because socially responsible organizations require leaders who can model ethical conduct, inspire trust, and create cultures of responsibility. Similarly, Meng et al. (2023) argue that ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping top management decisions related to CSR by promoting value-based judgment, stakeholder sensitivity, and long-term thinking. Thus, CSR without ethics risks becoming symbolic, while ethics without leadership support often remains ineffective in practice.

Leadership, therefore, occupies a pivotal place in the CSR–ethics nexus. Leadership is no longer assessed solely by managerial efficiency or financial performance; it is increasingly evaluated by the capacity to balance organizational goals with social justice, environmental stewardship, and employee well-being. Contemporary leadership research highlights the rise of responsible, inclusive, and ethical leadership models that prioritize stakeholder engagement, systems thinking, sustainability, and moral accountability (Muff et al., 2022; Fujimoto et al., 2024). Wang et al. (2024), in their meta-analytic review, further demonstrate that strategic leaders significantly influence CSR orientation and implementation, particularly through governance values, board priorities, and organizational culture. In practical terms, leaders shape whether CSR becomes embedded in recruitment, employee welfare, diversity, environmental practices, and community

development, or remains a rhetorical commitment. Within this broader debate, women's leadership has gained increasing scholarly and policy attention as a driver of innovation, inclusion, and social transformation. Research suggests that women in leadership can strengthen participatory decision-making, social responsiveness, employee-centered management, and ethical governance. Studies have also found positive associations between gender diversity in leadership and CSR performance, suggesting that women leaders often broaden organizational attention to human rights, labour standards, social inclusion, and stakeholder well-being (Ali et al., 2024 ; Monteiro et al., 2022). Likewise, Theis and Nipper (2021) report that executive gender composition can shape corporate social and ecological investments, while Monteiro et al. (2022) show that women managers contribute positively to labour practice, decent work, and human-rights reporting. These findings suggest that women's leadership is not merely a representation issue ; it is also a governance and sustainability issue.

In Cameroon, the relevance of this debate is particularly significant. Women contribute substantially to national development across education, health, entrepreneurship, civil society, public administration, politics, and community development. Women are increasingly taking on professional and managerial positions, and evidence from Cameroon shows that they play key economic and social roles in households, local communities, and informal governance structures (Chance & Abdoul, 2025). Yet, despite these contributions, leadership inequalities remain visible. Women continue to face structural and institutional barriers such as gender stereotypes, limited access to leadership networks, weak mentoring structures, unequal promotion opportunities, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms. These obstacles may be strengthened at the organizational level by inadequate ethical frameworks, nepotism, unclear hiring and advancement procedures, and the constrained institutionalization of gender-responsive CSR. The Cameroonian CSR context also presents important challenges. Fofuh and Awolusi (2021) found that CSR practice among local businesses in Cameroon remains relatively underdeveloped, with weak attention to stakeholder needs, environmental concerns, and community accountability. More broadly, CSR in Sub-Saharan Africa is often constrained by implementation gaps, limited regulatory enforcement, and tensions between formal responsibility commitments and actual human-rights practices (Ndong Ntoutoume, 2023). In such a context, women's leadership becomes a critical lens through which to examine whether CSR and ethics are genuinely transforming organizations or merely functioning as symbolic discourse. If CSR and ethics are to promote inclusion and sustainable development, they must also address women's access to leadership, voice in decision-making, and participation in organizational governance. Against this background, the present study is anchored in the view that CSR, ethics, and leadership are deeply interconnected. Examining these constructs through the experiences and realities of women in Cameroon is important not only for understanding gendered leadership dynamics, but also for assessing how socially responsible and ethical

organizational systems can contribute to more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable development in Cameroon.

Despite the growing global emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical leadership, and gender-inclusive governance, there is still limited empirical evidence on how these dimensions shape women's leadership in Cameroon. Existing studies on CSR in Cameroon largely focus on firm performance, sustainability and general organizational practices, with far less attention to how CSR and ethics affect women's access to leadership, decision-making power, and professional advancement (Biloua Fouda, 2022; Njaya, 2023; Sangué-Fotso, 2025). This gap is important because many organizations publicly endorse CSR principles, yet the practical implementation of socially responsible and gender-responsive policies often remains weak or inconsistent. In such settings, ethical problems such as favoritism, corruption, discrimination, lack of transparency, and gender bias may continue to undermine women's leadership opportunities and organizational legitimacy (Aminatou et al., 2023). Recent evidence also suggests that women's leadership in African organizations remains shaped by structural and institutional barriers, including patriarchal norms, exclusion from strategic networks, and unequal access to promotion opportunities (Castellanza & Woywode, 2023; Haegele, 2024). In Cameroon, these barriers may persist even in organizations that formally claim commitment to CSR. There is therefore a need for an empirical review that examines how CSR and ethical leadership interact to influence women's leadership experiences, opportunities, and constraints in the Cameroonian context.

Purpose and objective of the Study

The purpose of the article is to examine the relationship between CSR, ethics, and women's leadership in Cameroon, with emphasis on women's experiences, opportunities, challenges, and contributions. To explore how corporate social responsibility and ethical leadership practices shape women's leadership experiences in Cameroon.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Review

CSR has evolved from a narrow philanthropic idea into a broad framework for responsible business conduct. In contemporary scholarship, CSR generally refers to an organization's obligation to manage its economic, social, environmental, and ethical impacts in ways that benefit society beyond profit-making. One of the most influential formulations remains Carroll's CSR model, which defines CSR as encompassing the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations that society has of organizations (Carroll, 2021). Because it encompasses both business performance and social responsibility components, this viewpoint is still commonly used in current CSR literature (Gond et al., 2023; Frerichs & Teichert, 2026). Institutional definitions reinforce this broad understanding. The European Commission defines CSR as the responsibility of businesses for their impact on society and emphasizes the integration of social, environmental, ethical, human rights, and consumer considerations into business operations and strategy through

stakeholder collaboration (European Commission, 2024). Similarly, the World Bank views CSR as operating a business in a way that meets or exceeds legal and societal expectations, including labor standards, environmental stewardship, and community engagement (World Bank, 2025). CSR is commonly explained through four interrelated responsibilities. Economic responsibility requires firms to remain profitable, sustainable, efficient, and committed to fair business practices, since profitability enables long-term value creation and stakeholder support. Legal responsibility obliges organizations to obey laws, regulations, tax rules, labor standards, and environmental requirements in the countries where they operate. Ethical responsibility goes beyond compliance and requires firms to do what is fair, just, transparent, and morally right in their treatment of employees, customers, suppliers, and communities. Finally, philanthropic responsibility concerns voluntary contributions to social well-being, such as supporting education, healthcare, women's empowerment, poverty reduction, and environmental protection. Together, these four dimensions present CSR as a strategic and moral commitment to sustainable development, stakeholder welfare, and corporate legitimacy in society.

CSR in the Cameroonian Context

CSR in Cameroon has expanded beyond philanthropy to include employee welfare, sustainability disclosure, community engagement, financial inclusion, and environmental stewardship, although implementation remains uneven across sectors. In the banking and microfinance sector, CSR is increasingly linked to governance, customer protection, staff welfare, community support, and ethical compliance. Studies on Cameroonian banks and microfinance institutions show that CSR is often shaped by parent-company policies, reputational concerns, and the need to strengthen stakeholder trust, but gaps remain in transparency, local accountability, and long-term social impact (Afana Bindouga, 2021; Bimeme Bengono & Ongono Amogo, 2022). In telecommunications, CSR has become more visible through digital inclusion, mobile money services, community projects, and support for the Sustainable Development Goals. Recent evidence suggests that telecom operators contribute to financial inclusion and social outreach, though CSR in this sector is still driven largely by market expansion and brand legitimacy rather than deeply embedded sustainability frameworks (Elle, 2024; Molende Negtine & Atong, 2026). In higher education, CSR is emerging through scholarships, staff development, community service, research outreach, gender inclusion, and environmental awareness, yet institutionalization remains weak and often dependent on donor-funded initiatives or leadership commitment.

In the extractive, agro-industrial, and manufacturing sectors, CSR is strongly tied to environmental management, local community relations, occupational health and safety, and compensation for social and ecological externalities. Nevertheless, data from Cameroon demonstrates enduring conflict between CSR theory and practice, particularly in situations where businesses put profitability ahead of community well-being and environmental preservation (Ndzi

& Ollong, 2016/2025; Fofuh & Awolusi, 2021). Similarly, NGOs and development agencies have promoted CSR-related values such as inclusion, women's empowerment, local capacity building, and ethical accountability. Overall, CSR in Cameroon is growing, but recent scholarship indicates that stronger regulation, stakeholder monitoring, and context-sensitive governance are needed to transform CSR from symbolic compliance into measurable social responsibility and sustainable development practice (Dongmo & Tegofack, 2025; Tegofack & Claire, 2026).

Concept of Ethics

Ethics refers to the moral principles, values, and standards that guide behaviour, decisions, and relationships within organizations. In organizational settings, ethics provides a framework for distinguishing right from wrong and for ensuring that managerial and employee actions are consistent with integrity, justice, and responsibility. Recent scholarship treats organizational ethics not merely as compliance with rules, but as the broader ethical climate that shapes how people make decisions, treat others, and exercise authority (Parboteeah, Weiss, & Hoegl, 2024; Rhodes, 2023). Thus, ethics in organizations concerns both formal systems such as codes of conduct and compliance procedures and lived practices of fairness, honesty, and accountability. The major components of organizational ethics include integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, honesty, anti-corruption practices, respect for diversity and human dignity, non-discrimination, compliance, and professional conduct. Integrity requires consistency between values and actions, while accountability ensures that individuals and institutions take responsibility for their decisions and outcomes. Transparency promotes openness in procedures and communication, and fairness demands equitable treatment in opportunities, rewards, and sanctions. Anti-corruption practices, respect for human dignity, and non-discrimination are equally central because they protect employees from abuse, favoritism, and exclusion while reinforcing trust in organizational processes (Shahzad et al., 2024; Stewart, Snyder, & Kou, 2023). Ethics strongly influences human resource and leadership processes. In recruitment and promotion, ethical standards encourage merit-based selection rather than nepotism, bribery, or gender bias. In remuneration and performance appraisal, ethics supports equity, consistency, and transparency, thereby reducing perceptions of injustice. Ethical principles also shape conflict resolution by promoting dialogue, impartiality, and respect for due process. More broadly, an ethical organizational climate improves employee commitment, well-being, trust, and workplace justice, while decreasing unethical behavior and deviant acts (Antunez, Ramalho, & Marques, 2024; Frontiers study on ethical climate, 2022). Consequently, ethics is a foundational pillar of effective leadership and sustainable organizational governance.

Concept of Leadership

Leadership refers to the capacity of an individual to influence, guide, motivate, and direct others toward the

achievement of organizational goals. It is not merely the exercise of authority, but a relational and strategic process through which leaders shape vision, align people, and create conditions for performance, innovation, and organizational well-being. Recent scholarship presents leadership as a multidimensional construct that includes ethical responsibility, inclusion, adaptability, and the ability to respond to social and organizational change (Pincus, 2024).

Several leadership approaches are especially relevant to contemporary organizations. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring followers through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. It encourages employees to exceed expectations and supports organizational change. Servant leadership focuses on serving others first, prioritizing employee growth, empowerment, and well-being. Ethical leadership highlights integrity, fairness, transparency, and moral decision-making, thereby fostering trust and accountability within organizations. Participative leadership promotes shared decision-making and values employee voice, while inclusive leadership creates an environment in which diverse members feel respected, valued, and psychologically safe to contribute (Fatoki, 2024; Fujimoto et al., 2024; Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). Strategic leadership, on the other hand, is concerned with long-term direction, organizational sustainability, and the alignment of internal capabilities with external opportunities and threats. These leadership philosophies are very pertinent to women's experiences in businesses. Women leaders often navigate leadership within contexts shaped by gender stereotypes, unequal access to power networks, and biased promotion systems. Recent studies suggest that gendered organisational cultures can limit women's possibilities, while ethical and inclusive leadership situations can improve their confidence, involvement, voice, and advancement into leadership roles (Haynes, 2024; Kark & Buengeler, 2024). Thus, leadership should be understood not only as a mechanism for achieving organizational goals, but also as a social process that can either reproduce or challenge inequality. For women in organizations, leadership is closely tied to recognition, legitimacy, inclusion, and access to decision-making power.

Link between CSR, Ethics and Women's Leadership

The relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethics, and women's leadership is increasingly recognized in contemporary organizational research. These three constructs are mutually reinforcing because socially responsible organizations are more likely to institutionalize ethical values, and ethical organizational cultures tend to create better conditions for women's participation, advancement, and effectiveness in leadership. In this sense, CSR is not only an external commitment to communities and the environment; it is also an internal governance framework that shapes workplace inclusion, employee welfare, diversity, and fair opportunity structures (Deng et al., 2024).

First, CSR can create inclusive workplaces by encouraging gender-sensitive policies such as equal opportunity recruitment, leadership development for women, family-friendly work arrangements, anti-harassment procedures, and

investment in employee well-being. When CSR is embedded in human resource systems and corporate governance, it can reduce structural barriers that often prevent women from progressing into leadership positions. Recent evidence suggests that organizations with stronger CSR commitments are more likely to value stakeholder inclusion, employee voice, and social equity, all of which improve the institutional climate for women leaders (Deng et al., 2024). In this respect, CSR moves beyond philanthropy and becomes a practical mechanism for advancing workplace justice and representation.

Second, ethics strengthens women's leadership by promoting fairness, merit-based advancement, transparency, and respect for human dignity. Ethical organizations are less likely to tolerate discrimination, favoritism, and exclusionary practices that undermine women's access to decision-making roles. Ethical leadership also fosters trust, psychological safety, and accountability, which are critical for employee engagement and leadership legitimacy. Ramachandran et al. (2024) argue that compassionate and ethical leadership contributes to employee well-being, relational trust, and inclusive organizational cultures. Similarly, recent reviews on female leadership show that women's leadership effectiveness is often enhanced in environments where ethical norms, fairness, and participation are valued over rigid hierarchical power structures (Buss et al., 2025).

Third, women leaders themselves are often associated with socially responsible and justice-oriented leadership approaches. Although women should not be essentialized as naturally "more ethical," emerging scholarship indicates that many women leaders emphasize care, inclusion, collaboration, and community responsiveness in ways that align closely with CSR and ethical governance. Stajkovic and Stajkovic (2024) show that ethics-of-care leadership is linked to inclusion, social justice, and community well-being, while Aulia et al. (2024) highlight women's leadership as an important force in advancing gender equality and social transformation. In the Cameroonian context, this connection is particularly important because women leaders often operate within systems marked by patriarchal norms, unequal access to power, and weak institutional accountability. Strengthening CSR and ethics can therefore help create organizational environments in which women not only enter leadership, but also exercise leadership in ways that promote fairness, responsible governance, and sustainable development.

Theoretical Framework

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory provides a useful lens for examining the links among CSR, ethics, and women's leadership. Originally advanced by Freeman, the theory argues that organizations have obligations not only to shareholders but also to all groups that affect or are affected by organizational activities, including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, regulators, and society at large. In contemporary CSR scholarship, this perspective has become central because it shifts attention from profit maximization alone to value creation for multiple stakeholders. Recent studies affirm that

stakeholder-oriented organizations are more likely to integrate ethical governance, employee welfare, social inclusion, and sustainable community engagement into their strategic priorities (Awa et al., 2024; Dmytriiev et al., 2021; Stoelhorst & Vishwanathan, 2024). Within this framework, women employees and women leaders are not peripheral actors but key stakeholders whose interests, rights, and contributions must be recognized in organizational decision-making. A stakeholder perspective therefore supports gender-inclusive leadership by encouraging fair promotion systems, equitable access to opportunities, voice in governance, and protection from discriminatory practices. It also helps explain why organizations that genuinely engage stakeholders tend to adopt stronger CSR commitments and more ethical leadership cultures. In the Cameroonian context, Stakeholder Theory is especially relevant because it highlights the responsibility of organizations to balance economic performance with social justice, gender equity, and community development.

Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical Leadership Theory explains how leaders shape the moral conduct of followers and the ethical climate of organizations through fairness, integrity, role modelling, and principled decision-making. Building on the foundational work of Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), the theory views ethical leaders as both moral persons—honest, trustworthy, and fair—and moral managers who actively communicate ethical standards, reward appropriate behaviour, and sanction misconduct. Recent scholarship reinforces this view by showing that ethical leadership promotes organizational justice, trust, job satisfaction, and voice behaviour, while reducing misconduct and perceptions of unfairness (Grobler & Grobler, 2024; Jeong et al., 2024). Ethical leaders influence employees not only through formal rules but also through daily example, empathy, and consistency between words and actions (Gardner et al., 2024). In relation to women's leadership, Ethical Leadership Theory is particularly useful because it explains how ethical organizational climates can either enable or constrain women's advancement. Where leaders uphold fairness, transparency, and equal opportunity, women are more likely to access leadership roles, exercise voice, and gain legitimacy as decision-makers. Conversely, in unethical climates marked by favoritism, discrimination, or opaque promotion systems, women's leadership trajectories may be undermined. Thus, Ethical Leadership Theory provides a strong lens for examining women's leadership experiences in Cameroon.

Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory explains how socially constructed expectations about masculinity and femininity shape leadership opportunities, behaviors, and evaluations of women leaders. Originally advanced by Eagly, the theory argues that societies assign communal roles to women such as nurturing, cooperation, and care while men are more often associated with agentic roles such as authority, assertiveness, and dominance. Because leadership positions are traditionally linked to agentic qualities, women may be judged as less suitable for leadership even when they possess the required competence. In organizational settings, this creates a "role

incongruity" between feminine stereotypes and dominant images of leadership. Recent studies continue to show that gender stereotypes influence perceptions of leadership potential, promotion, and acceptance of women in authority. Karakulak et al. (2022) found that concerns about leadership are interpreted differently for women and men because women leaders are often evaluated through gendered expectations. Hernandez Bark et al. (2022) further showed that women leaders gain legitimacy more easily when they are perceived as representative of their teams, suggesting that acceptance of female leadership remains socially negotiated. Takizawa et al. (2024) also demonstrate that stereotypes still affect leader selection in crisis contexts, even when women are seen as suitable for "communal" leadership roles. Thus, Social Role Theory remains highly relevant for understanding women's leadership experiences in contemporary organizations, including in Cameroon.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory is highly relevant to the study of women's leadership, CSR, and ethics because it explains how leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest and work toward collective organizational goals. Originally developed by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), the theory emphasizes four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In contemporary organizations, transformational leadership is increasingly associated with innovation, inclusion, ethical conduct, and sustainable organizational change. Through empowerment and encouragement, transformational leaders foster creative work behavior, promote employee creativity, and create psychologically safe environments, according to recent research (Sanlioz & Yildiz, 2026). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that transformational leadership enhances organizational performance, employee commitment, and adaptability during times of doubt and change (Rule & Regehr, 2024; Agazu, 2025). For women leaders in Cameroon, this theory is especially useful because it highlights leadership as influence rooted in vision, empathy, empowerment, and change orientation rather than authority alone. Women leaders who adopt transformational leadership can promote inclusive decision-making, ethical accountability, and socially responsible practices within organizations. Such leadership may also strengthen mentoring, collaboration, and community engagement, thereby positioning women not only as organizational managers but also as agents of innovation, equity, and sustainable development.

Empirical Literature Review

CSR and leadership

Recent global studies show that CSR is closely associated with leadership effectiveness and positive organizational outcomes. First, CSR enhances organizational reputation by signaling responsibility, legitimacy, and stakeholder commitment. Firms that integrate CSR into strategy are often viewed more favorably by employees, customers, and investors, which strengthens trust in leadership and the public image of the organization (Risi et al., 2023). Second, CSR

supports employee engagement by creating a sense of meaning, belonging, and organizational pride. Employees are more likely to identify with organizations whose leaders demonstrate social and environmental responsibility, and this often translates into higher motivation, commitment, and participation in organizational goals (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020; Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility and Employee Engagement, 2025). Last but not least, CSR advances inclusive and transformational leadership by fostering shared responsibility, fairness, and employee voice. Recent studies on green inclusive leadership further show that leaders who embed CSR values foster stronger work engagement, innovation, and employee advocacy (ElAdawi et al., 2024; Siddiquei et al., 2025). Finally, CSR contributes to sustainability and social justice by aligning leadership with environmental stewardship, community development, and ethical governance. In this way, CSR is not only a reputational tool but also a leadership mechanism for building sustainable, inclusive, and socially responsible organizations worldwide.

Ethics and leadership

Recent empirical studies consistently show that ethical climate and ethical leadership are strongly associated with positive organizational outcomes. Ethical leadership promotes fairness, integrity, and transparency, which in turn strengthen employees' trust in leaders and institutions. For example, Özdoğru and Sarier (2024), in a meta-analysis of 47 studies, found that ethical leadership had a very strong positive effect on organizational trust and organizational justice, and a strong positive influence on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similarly, Li (2024) reported that ethical leadership enhances employees' internal job satisfaction and encourages organizational citizenship behaviour, especially when leaders display empathy. At the broader organizational level, Parboteeah et al. (2024) showed that ethical climate is significantly linked to desirable outcomes such as employee well-being, commitment, and improved workplace relationships across national contexts. Ethical leadership has also been found to reduce unethical behaviour and corruption by weakening instrumental ethical climates and discouraging the displacement of responsibility among employees (Antunez et al., 2024). In addition, Dey et al. (2022) demonstrated that ethical leadership fosters sustainable organizational performance by shaping employee values, ethical behaviour, and workplace climate. Taken together, these studies suggest that organizations with strong ethical climates and ethical leaders are more likely to experience higher trust, stronger employee commitment, lower corruption, and better overall performance.

Women's leadership

Empirical studies on women's leadership consistently show that women remain underrepresented in management and senior decision-making positions despite advances in education and labour-force participation. Recent evidence suggests that women's progression into leadership is constrained by a combination of structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers. For instance, Kulkarni and Mishra (2022), in a systematic review of women's leadership in organizations, found that women in management frequently

encounter stereotypes about competence, limited access to strategic networks, and organizational cultures that favour masculine leadership norms. Similarly, Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) reported that women leaders continue to face persistent challenges such as exclusion from influential networks, lack of sponsorship, and gendered expectations that undermine leadership legitimacy.

Empirical work also highlights gender barriers in promotion and the persistence of the glass ceiling. Guillén et al. (2022) developed the "TOP WOMAN" framework and demonstrated that women's access to management is hindered by implicit bias, restricted promotion pathways, and organizational practices that undervalue women's leadership potential. In the financial sector, Huang et al. (2024) provided robust evidence that gender bias in promotion remains a significant obstacle, with women less likely than men to advance even when performance indicators are comparable. Mentoring and leadership development have been identified as important mechanisms for overcoming these constraints. Research shows that mentoring enhances women's confidence, career planning, leadership identity, and work-life role management, although its effectiveness depends on organizational support and access to influential mentors (Bahrami et al., 2023).

Work-family balance remains another major issue shaping women's leadership trajectories. Studies indicate that women often carry disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, which can limit availability for leadership roles and intensify career interruptions. More broadly, institutional discrimination and manifested in biased evaluations, exclusionary norms, and unequal access to opportunities and continues to reproduce leadership inequalities. Collectively, recent empirical literature suggests that advancing women's leadership requires not only mentoring and leadership development programmes, but also structural reforms in promotion systems, workplace flexibility, and inclusive organizational cultures.

African and Cameroonian Studies

African scholarship increasingly shows that CSR, ethics, and women's leadership are closely connected, but the relationship is shaped by local governance systems, institutional capacity, and gender norms. Across African firms, recent evidence suggests that female leadership and sustainability performance are mutually reinforcing over time, although the relationship is not always linear in the short term. Using African firm-level evidence, Okafor and Ujah (2024) show that female corporate leadership can positively influence environmental, social, and governance (ESG) outcomes in the long run, while the implementation of ESG reforms may initially produce mixed effects for women leaders because of institutional rigidities and managerial resistance. This wider African evidence is important for Cameroon, where the organizational environment still combines modern governance expectations with entrenched patriarchal and informal practices.

Within Cameroon, the CSR literature indicates that implementation remains uneven across sectors and is often driven more by reputation, compliance, and stakeholder pressure than by deeply institutionalized ethical commitments.

Fofuh and Awolusi (2021), in their study of local businesses in Cameroon, found that CSR awareness exists but remains relatively underdeveloped, especially in relation to environmental protection, community engagement, and formal disclosure. Their findings suggest that many firms are not yet fully equipped to respond to stakeholder expectations and that weak regulatory enforcement limits the ethical depth of CSR practice. More recently, Njaya (2023) proposed a typology of Cameroonian firms and showed that while some enterprises are genuinely engaged in CSR, others remain only moderately responsible or resistant to socially responsible reforms. Likewise, Boubakary et al. (2024) argue that CSR in Cameroonian SMEs is rooted in the entrepreneurial and relational fabric of firms, but its expression often remains informal and highly dependent on leadership values.

The gendered dimension of CSR is becoming more visible in Cameroon. Biloa Fouda (2022), studying women-led SMEs in Douala, found that women managers often interpret CSR through a care-oriented and community-centered lens, prioritizing employees, customers, and local welfare over purely instrumental goals. This finding aligns with broader international evidence that women leaders tend to support more socially responsive and stakeholder-oriented leadership practices (Hyun et al., 2022). However, women's leadership in Cameroon continues to face ethical and structural constraints, including limited access to strategic decision-making spaces, gender stereotypes, weak mentoring systems, and governance challenges such as favoritism, opacity, and uneven meritocracy. These obstacles affect women's participation across education, business, politics, and public administration. Taken together, African and Cameroonian studies suggest that strengthening ethical governance, codifying CSR obligations, and intentionally promoting women's leadership are mutually reinforcing pathways for more inclusive and sustainable organizational development in Cameroon.

Gap in the Literature

Although the literature on CSR, ethical leadership, and women's leadership has expanded in recent years, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing scholarship treats CSR, ethics, and leadership as related but separate domains rather than as an integrated framework for understanding women's leadership experiences and outcomes. Recent reviews confirm strong links between ethical leadership and CSR, as well as between leadership characteristics and CSR performance, but they rarely center women's leadership as the focal analytical lens (de Klerk & Jooste, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zhu & Zhao, 2024). Second, while studies increasingly show that female executives can shape CSR priorities and responsible governance, this evidence is drawn largely from Europe, North America, and Asia, leaving African settings underrepresented (Hyun et al., 2022; Jeong & Harrison, 2024). Third, Cameroon-specific evidence remains limited. Existing work in Cameroon has examined CSR practices in women-led SMEs and broader CSR implementation in firms, but there is still insufficient empirical evidence on how CSR and organizational ethics jointly shape women's access to leadership, leadership legitimacy, and everyday leadership experiences across sectors (Bilola Fouda, 2022; Ghembu

Takamhouo, 2024). This study addresses that gap by foregrounding women's voices and empirically linking CSR, ethics, and leadership in the Cameroonian context.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design to examine CSR, ethical leadership, and women's leadership in Cameroon. The study is conducted in selected cities across Cameroon, namely Yaoundé, Douala, Bamenda, Buea, Garoua, Kribi, Bertoua, and Ngaoundéré. The target population consists of women serving as deans, heads of departments, principals, directors, managers, supervisors, lecturers, administrators, project officers, and business leaders. A purposively selected sample of 26 women leaders participated in semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select 26 women occupying leadership and managerial positions across different sectors. Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves coding recurring themes and organizing them into key categories, including CSR practices, ethical leadership, leadership opportunities, barriers to women's leadership, and recommendations for improving women's leadership in Cameroon.

Research Objective

To explore how corporate social responsibility and ethical leadership practices shape women's leadership experiences in Cameroon.

Research Question

How do women leaders perceive the influence of CSR and ethical leadership practices on their leadership experiences in Cameroon?

III. FINDINGS

The study was conducted in eight cities across seven regions of Cameroon: Yaoundé, Douala, Bamenda, Buea, Garoua, Kribi, Bertoua, and Ngaoundéré. The interviews explored participants' perceptions and experiences regarding CSR, ethics, and leadership within their respective organizations. The responses have been organized into major themes and supported with selected verbatim quotations to provide a comprehensive understanding of how CSR and ethical leadership influence women's leadership opportunities, challenges, and experiences in the Cameroonian context. A respondent stated that *to me, Corporate Social Responsibility means that an organization should not focus only on making profits but should also care for its employees, customers, the community, and the environment. A socially responsible organization creates opportunities for women, supports education, and operates with fairness and transparency* (Yaounde, INT- 01, 05 June 2026). This response highlights that Corporate Social Responsibility extends beyond profit generation to include social, environmental, and ethical responsibilities. The participant emphasizes that genuine CSR promotes fairness, transparency, and equal opportunities for women while contributing positively to employees, communities, and society as a whole. Another respondent

indicated that : *CSR is about giving back to society while conducting business ethically. In my organization, it includes supporting local communities, protecting the environment, and ensuring equal opportunities for women and men. I believe CSR strengthens public trust and improves employee commitment* (Douala, INT- 01, 16 June 2026). This respondent perceives CSR as a holistic approach that integrates ethical business practices with social and environmental responsibility. It also emphasizes the importance of gender equality as a key component of CSR. The findings suggest that effective CSR practices can enhance organizational reputation, build public trust, and foster greater employee commitment and engagement. A respondent from Ngaoundéré revealed that CSR as :

CSR means balancing economic success with social and environmental responsibility. Organizations should not focus solely on generating profits but should also consider the well-being of employees, customers, communities, and the environment. They have a responsibility to protect natural resources by adopting environmentally sustainable practices and minimizing their ecological footprint. In addition, organizations should actively support community development projects such as education, healthcare, youth empowerment, and poverty reduction initiatives. I also believe that CSR requires organizations to promote fairness, equality, and inclusiveness in the workplace. Women should be treated with dignity and respect, provided with equal opportunities for recruitment, promotion, leadership, and professional development, and protected from discrimination. When organizations genuinely integrate these principles into their operations, they strengthen public confidence, improve employee morale, and contribute to sustainable organizational and national development (Ngaoundéré, INT- 01, 18 July 2026).

The respondent views CSR as a multidimensional concept that integrates economic performance with social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and gender equity. The emphasis on equal leadership opportunities and professional development reflects the growing recognition of CSR as a driver of inclusive organizational practices. This perspective suggests that responsible organizations are better positioned to promote sustainable development, ethical leadership, and women's empowerment. Several recurring patterns emerged from the interviews that :

CSR is an ethical commitment where organizations voluntarily invest in projects that improve education, health services, environmental conservation, and women's empowerment. Such programs demonstrate that organizations care about improving the quality of life in the communities they serve as well as making money. By supporting schools, healthcare facilities, environmental protection programs, and opportunities for women, organizations contribute to sustainable social and economic development. I believe that CSR strengthens public trust, enhances corporate reputation, and creates long-term benefits for both society and the organization (Kribi, INT- 01, 05 June 2026).

This response emphasizes CSR as a voluntary ethical responsibility that extends beyond legal compliance. The participant associates CSR with sustainable development through investments in education, healthcare, environmental protection, and gender equality. The response also highlights the belief that socially responsible practices enhance organizational credibility while promoting inclusive community development. Another participant expressed the view that, *I see CSR as an organization's commitment to improving the quality of life of employees and surrounding communities while ensuring environmental sustainability and long-term business success* (Bamenda, INT- 01, 05 June 2026). A participant reported that,

CSR means treating employees fairly, ensuring equal opportunities for women, respecting labor rights, and supporting local communities through meaningful development initiatives. Organizations should provide fair wages, safe working conditions, equal access to leadership positions, and continuous professional development for all employees regardless of gender. They should also engage in community projects such as education, healthcare, and skills development that improve people's quality of life. In my opinion, CSR creates trust, strengthens organizational reputation, and promotes sustainable social and economic development (Buea, INT- 01, 05 July 2026).

This response demonstrates that the participant views CSR as encompassing both internal organizational responsibilities and external community engagement. The emphasis on fairness, gender equality, labor rights, and community development reflects a stakeholder-oriented understanding of CSR and highlights the importance of ethical leadership in promoting sustainable and inclusive organizational practices. Organizations must support national development in addition to making money. Although financial success is crucial for a business's long-term viability, businesses also have an obligation to provide social benefit by supporting youth employment, environmental protection, healthcare, education, and community infrastructure. They should support government development priorities, promote ethical business practices, create decent jobs, and empower women and vulnerable groups through inclusive policies. When organizations actively contribute to society, they help reduce inequality, strengthen public trust, and foster long-term economic growth and sustainable national development.

The interview question, *how has CSR influenced your leadership experience ?* generated rich and meaningful responses, providing valuable insights into the role of CSR in shaping women's leadership experiences across different organizational contexts. At the University of Garoua, a female dean revealed that :

CSR has significantly shaped my leadership approach by making me more conscious of the social impact of every decision I make. Beyond academic excellence, I prioritize staff welfare, student support, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. Through CSR initiatives such as scholarships for disadvantaged students and community outreach programmes, I have

learned that effective leadership is about creating value for society rather than merely achieving institutional goals. This has strengthened trust among colleagues and increased staff commitment (Garoua, INT- 01, 23 June 2026).

This response demonstrates that CSR has positively influenced leadership by encouraging ethical decision-making, employee welfare, environmental responsibility, and community engagement. The participant emphasizes that socially responsible leadership enhances trust, staff commitment, and organizational effectiveness while extending leadership beyond institutional performance to broader societal development. In Douala, a female bank manager shared her experience and her response highlights that CSR has positively influenced her leadership by promoting ethical banking practices, financial inclusion, employee engagement, and community empowerment. Her experience suggests that integrating CSR into organizational leadership strengthens stakeholder trust, enhances institutional reputation, and contributes to sustainable organizational performance.

CSR has transformed my leadership approach by strengthening my commitment to ethical decision-making, financial inclusion, and community development. As a bank manager, I have led initiatives that provide financial literacy training, support women entrepreneurs through access to credit, and encourage responsible lending practices. These programmes have not only empowered local communities but have also strengthened customer confidence in our institution. Internally, CSR has fostered a culture of teamwork, accountability, and employee engagement, motivating staff to align their work with the bank's social and ethical values. Through these experiences, I have learned that effective leadership extends beyond achieving financial targets; it also involves creating sustainable value for employees, customers, and society. CSR has therefore enhanced my leadership effectiveness by improving stakeholder relationships, increasing organizational trust, and contributing to the long-term reputation and success of the bank (Douala, INT- 01, 09 June 2026).

Female Secondary School Principal in Bamenda described that :

The socio-political challenges experienced in the region have made CSR an essential component of effective educational leadership. She explains that, as a school leader, she has prioritized psychosocial support programmes, community dialogue, and educational assistance for vulnerable learners to address the emotional, social, and academic needs of students. According to her, these CSR initiatives have strengthened resilience among learners, teachers, and parents while fostering a culture of care, empathy, and mutual support. She further notes that the school's commitment to community welfare has encouraged greater collaboration between parents, teachers, and local stakeholders, leading to increased trust and collective responsibility for learners' success. In her view, CSR has transformed her leadership style by emphasizing

compassion, inclusion, and social responsibility rather than focusing solely on academic performance. She concludes that socially responsible leadership plays a vital role in promoting educational continuity, community cohesion, and sustainable school development, particularly in regions facing prolonged social and political instability (Bamenda, INT- 01, 05 June 2026).

This response illustrates that CSR has become an essential leadership strategy in addressing the socio-political challenges affecting education in Bamenda. The school's principal exemplifies a sympathetic and inclusive style of leadership by fostering community dialogue, educational assistance for vulnerable students, and psychosocial support. The findings suggest that CSR strengthens resilience by fostering trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility among teachers, parents, and the wider community. The participant further indicates that socially responsible leadership extends beyond academic management to supporting learners' emotional and social well-being. Such practices contribute to a positive school climate and improve stakeholder engagement. The response highlights the important role of CSR in enhancing educational leadership, community cohesion, and sustainable school development in crisis-affected contexts. In Buea, Interview Response of a female NGO Director emphasized that :

CSR has greatly influenced my leadership by encouraging me to build strong partnerships with local communities, environmental organizations, educational institutions, and development partners. Through these collaborations, we regularly organize environmental sanitation campaigns, youth empowerment workshops, entrepreneurship training for women, and awareness programmes on sustainable development. These initiatives have strengthened my leadership skills by teaching me the importance of teamwork, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive decision-making. CSR has also enhanced transparency and accountability within our organization, as we are committed to using resources responsibly and reporting our activities openly. By working closely with different groups, I have learned that effective leadership is built on trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to improving community well-being. Overall, CSR has transformed my leadership into one that values social impact, environmental stewardship, and long-term sustainable development (Buea, INT- 01, 05 July 2026).

The participant's response indicates that CSR has strengthened collaborative and inclusive leadership through partnerships with multiple stakeholders. The emphasis on environmental sanitation, youth empowerment, and women's entrepreneurship reflects the integration of social and environmental responsibilities into leadership practices. Additionally, the statement stresses that transparency and accountability are necessary components of successful governance. Furthermore, stakeholder collaboration has enhanced trust and organizational credibility. These findings suggest that CSR contributes to the development of

transformational leadership by promoting community participation and sustainable development. The interview demonstrates that CSR enables women leaders to create positive social impact while improving organizational effectiveness. The respondent of a female business executive in Bertoua explained that :

CSR has transformed her understanding of leadership by emphasizing that businesses should create both economic and social value. She noted that, in addition to generating profits, her company actively invests in vocational training programmes, supports youth employment initiatives, and participates in environmental conservation projects within the Bertoua community. According to her, these CSR activities have strengthened employees' sense of purpose and commitment, leading to higher morale and improved teamwork. She also observed that regular engagement with local communities has enhanced the organization's reputation and built lasting trust among stakeholders. The respondent emphasized that participating in CSR programmes has improved her communication, empathy, and decision-making skills. She believes that responsible leadership requires listening to community needs and incorporating them into organizational strategies. Furthermore, CSR has encouraged collaboration with local authorities, educational institutions, and community organizations to promote sustainable development. She concluded that these experiences have made her a more responsible, ethical, inclusive, and people-centered leader who recognizes that long-term organizational success depends on balancing profitability with meaningful contributions to society (Bertoua, INT- 01, 14 July 2026).

The respondent's views indicate that CSR positively shapes leadership by integrating business performance with community development and environmental stewardship. Her experience suggests that socially responsible practices improve employee motivation, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and enhance organizational reputation. The findings also demonstrate that CSR promotes ethical, inclusive, and sustainable leadership, enabling business leaders to achieve long-term success while contributing to local socio-economic development. In Garoua, the Regional Health Administrator said that ;

Corporate Social Responsibility has helped me understand that healthcare leadership extends beyond the walls of hospitals and clinics. As a healthcare administrator, I believe our responsibility is not only to provide treatment but also to improve the overall well-being of the communities we serve. We regularly organize free medical consultations, maternal and child health awareness campaigns, vaccination outreach programmes, and health education sessions in rural communities where access to healthcare is limited. These CSR initiatives have strengthened public confidence in our institution, encouraged preventive healthcare practices, and improved collaboration between healthcare providers and local communities. They have

also motivated healthcare workers to serve with greater compassion, professionalism, and a stronger sense of social responsibility. Through these experiences, I have learned that ethical and community-centered leadership contributes to better health outcomes and promotes sustainable development commitment (Garoua, INT- 01, 12 June 2026).

This response highlights the important role of CSR in promoting community-centered healthcare leadership. The participant demonstrates that CSR initiatives improve access to essential health services, enhance public trust, and encourage preventive healthcare. The findings further suggest that socially responsible leadership strengthens employee motivation, professionalism, and ethical commitment while fostering stronger partnerships between healthcare institutions and local communities. CSR contributes to sustainable healthcare delivery and reinforces the social mission of health organizations.

On the question about respondents opinion of how does ethical leadership influence employee motivation and organizational performance ? a respondent captured that *ethical leadership encourages open communication and mutual respect between managers and employees. Workers become more committed because they feel their opinions matter. This increases teamwork, reduces conflicts, and enhances organizational performance in the long run* (Ngaoundéré, INT- 01, 18 July 2026). This response highlights the important role of ethical leadership in fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment. Open communication enables employees to share ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear, strengthening trust between leaders and staff. Mutual respect enhances employees' sense of belonging and motivates them to contribute more effectively to organizational goals. As employees become more engaged, teamwork improves and workplace conflicts are reduced through collaboration and transparency. These positive relationships contribute to higher productivity, employee satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness. The finding supports the view that ethical leadership is a key driver of sustainable organizational performance by promoting trust, participation, and long-term commitment among employees. Another woman said :

In my opinion, ethical leadership has a significant influence on employee motivation and organizational performance. When leaders consistently demonstrate ethical values such as justice, honesty, integrity, accountability, and responsibility, employees develop greater trust in management. This trust creates a positive working environment where staff feel respected, appreciated, and treated fairly. As a result, employees become more motivated to perform their duties with dedication and commitment. Ethical leaders also encourage transparency in decision-making and ensure that rewards and promotions are based on merit rather than favoritism. This increases employee confidence in the organization and strengthens teamwork. Furthermore, ethical leadership minimizes workplace conflicts, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems because employees are more willing to comply with

organizational policies and standards. Organizations with ethical leaders experience higher productivity, improved employee satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and better overall performance (Bamenda, INT- 01, 05 June 2026).

This response highlights that ethical leadership builds trust, fairness, and accountability within organizations. Employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are more motivated, committed, and willing to contribute to organizational goals. The participant also associates ethical leadership with reduced workplace misconduct and improved teamwork. The findings suggest that ethical leadership is an important driver of employee motivation and sustainable organizational performance.

In Yaoundé, a female director, responding to the of describing their journey into a leadership position. Participant 4 explained that;

My journey into leadership was gradual and required determination, patience, and continuous learning. I began my career as a junior administrative officer after completing my university education. At the beginning, I faced several challenges because leadership positions were mostly occupied by men, and many people believed that women were not capable of managing complex responsibilities. Instead of becoming discouraged, I focused on improving my professional skills, pursuing additional training, and demonstrating integrity and commitment in every assignment. Over the years, my supervisors recognized my dedication and ability to lead teams effectively. I was promoted to departmental coordinator, then deputy director, and eventually director. Throughout this journey, mentorship from experienced leaders, both women and men, played a significant role in building my confidence and leadership abilities. I also benefited from organizational policies that encouraged equal opportunities and professional development. Although balancing family responsibilities with professional demands was sometimes difficult, support from my family and colleagues helped me overcome these challenges. Today, I believe that ethical leadership, transparency, respect for employees, and social responsibility are essential qualities for effective leadership. My experience has shown that when organizations create equal opportunities and value competence rather than gender, women can perform exceptionally well in leadership roles (Yaounde, INT- 01, 05 June 2026).

The participant's response illustrates that women's leadership development is a gradual process shaped by perseverance, continuous professional development, and resilience in overcoming gender-related barriers. Despite facing stereotypes that questioned women's leadership capabilities, the participant advanced through competence, integrity, and commitment to organizational goals. The narrative also highlights the importance of mentorship, institutional support, and equal opportunity policies in facilitating career progression. Furthermore, balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations emerged

as a significant challenge, emphasizing the need for supportive work environments. The response suggests that ethical leadership, transparency, and corporate social responsibility are fundamental drivers of effective leadership and that organizations that prioritize merit and gender equality create an enabling environment for women to attain and excel in leadership positions. These findings reinforce the view that women's leadership success is influenced not only by individual effort but also by supportive organizational cultures and inclusive leadership practices. A Higher Education Female Administrator, Ngaoundéré also said that ; *I started as an assistant lecturer before becoming a senior lecturer and later assuming administrative responsibilities. Leadership has been a journey of learning, collaboration, and maintaining integrity despite numerous institutional challenges* (Ngaoundéré, INT- 01, 18 July 2026). In Buea a participant from a NGO Project Manager

My leadership journey began when I joined a community development organization as a volunteer. At the time, I was motivated by a strong desire to serve vulnerable communities, particularly women, children, and disadvantaged youth. Although I had no formal leadership position, I actively participated in community outreach programmes, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives. Through dedication, teamwork, and consistent performance, I gradually gained the trust of my supervisors and colleagues. As I became more involved in project implementation, I was entrusted with coordinating small community projects before eventually managing larger programmes funded by national and international partners. These responsibilities allowed me to develop essential leadership skills such as communication, problem-solving, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and financial accountability. My experience also taught me the importance of ethical decision-making, transparency, and respect for community members. CSR initiatives played a significant role in shaping my leadership style. Working closely with private companies, local authorities, and civil society organizations exposed me to sustainable development practices and strengthened my ability to engage diverse stakeholders. Through CSR activities such as environmental conservation, educational support, health awareness campaigns, and women's economic empowerment programmes, I learned that effective leadership extends beyond organizational success to creating positive social impact. Today, I believe that servant leadership, ethical conduct, and community participation are fundamental to achieving sustainable development and improving the lives of vulnerable populations (Buea, INT- 01, 05 July 2026).

The participant's response demonstrates that leadership can emerge through volunteerism, commitment, and practical community engagement rather than formal authority alone. Her experience highlights the significant contribution of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives in developing ethical leadership competencies, stakeholder collaboration, and social accountability. The findings also suggest that

community-based experiences strengthen women's confidence and managerial capabilities. Furthermore, the interview underscores the importance of servant leadership and inclusive participation in addressing community needs. Overall, the response illustrates how CSR serves as a catalyst for nurturing responsible and effective women leaders in Cameroon. In Bertoua, a Public Service Manager revealed that ; *my career progression was based on competence, discipline, and continuous professional development. Leadership required patience because promotion opportunities were limited, especially for women* (Bertoua, INT- 01, 14 July 2026). This response highlights the importance of merit, professionalism, and lifelong learning in achieving leadership positions. It also reveals the structural challenges women face in accessing promotion opportunities within public institutions. The experience emphasizes the need for gender-inclusive policies that support women's career advancement.

In Douala, the University Administrator said that ; *my leadership journey started as a lecturer. Through hard work, research productivity, and active participation in university committees, I earned promotions that eventually led to my appointment as Head of Department. The process required resilience because women often have to prove themselves more than men* (Douala, INT- 01, 16 June 2026). This response highlights the importance of professional competence, academic productivity, and institutional engagement in women's leadership advancement within higher education. It shows that women leaders often overcome additional barriers, including gender stereotypes and unequal expectations. Resilience, commitment, and continuous professional development appear as key factors that support women's progression into administrative positions. The experience also emphasizes the need for universities to promote inclusive leadership opportunities for both women and men. In Kribi, a Business Executive revealed that ;

I began my professional journey in customer service, where I developed strong communication skills, customer relationship management abilities, and a deep understanding of organizational operations. Through commitment, ethical behaviour, accountability, and continuous professional development, I gradually progressed into operations management. My ability to work collaboratively with colleagues, solve problems effectively, and promote responsible business practices helped me gain the confidence of senior management. These experiences eventually led to my appointment as branch manager, where I now focus on effective leadership, employee development, and contributing to the organization's social and economic impact within the Kribi community (Kribi, INT- 01, 05 June 2026).

This response highlights the importance of professional growth, ethical behaviour, and teamwork in women's leadership advancement. The participant's transition from customer service to operations management demonstrates that leadership positions can be achieved through competence, commitment, and continuous improvement. Her experience also shows that accountability and integrity help build trust within organizations. This reflects the role of ethical

leadership in creating opportunities for women to access managerial positions in the business sector in Kribi. A female in Garoua pointed that ; *my promotion came after several years of demonstrating professionalism, ethical conduct, and good management of healthcare teams. Continuous training and support from senior mentors prepared me for leadership* (Garoua, INT- 01, 15 June 2026). This response highlights that women's advancement into leadership positions is often achieved through professionalism, ethical behavior, and effective team management. The participant emphasizes the importance of continuous training and mentorship in developing leadership competencies. It also shows that organizational support and recognition of competence contribute significantly to women's career progression. In the healthcare sector, ethical leadership and collaborative management are essential for improving institutional performance and service delivery.

Interview on what role should government and private organizations play in promoting ethical leadership and CSR among women ? A women Academic Leader in Yaoundé revealed that ;

The government should create strong policies that promote gender equality, transparency, and women's participation in leadership positions. It should also provide leadership training programmes that equip women with ethical decision-making skills. Private organizations should establish fair promotion systems, mentorship programmes, and opportunities for women to occupy strategic positions. CSR should not only focus on financial contributions but also on developing human capacity, especially among women (Yaounde, INT- 01, 23 July 2026).

This response indicates the importance of institutional support in strengthening women's ethical leadership and participation in decision-making processes. It emphasizes that government policies and organizational practices must work together to remove barriers that limit women's advancement. The respondent also suggests that CSR should move beyond charitable activities toward sustainable capacity-building initiatives. Therefore, empowering women through training, mentorship, and equal opportunities contributes to responsible leadership and long-term organizational development. Female Administrator in Douala revealed that

Government plays a significant role in fostering an environment where women can compete equally with men. This requires the implementation of effective policies that promote gender equality, eliminate discriminatory practices, and ensure that women have equal access to leadership opportunities. The government should also strengthen legal frameworks, provide capacity-building programmes, and encourage institutions to adopt gender-responsive strategies that support women's professional advancement. Private organizations should integrate women's leadership development into their CSR strategies by creating mentorship programmes, offering scholarships, supporting professional training, and providing networking platforms that enable women to develop their

leadership competencies. Companies should recognize that empowering women leaders contributes not only to organizational performance but also to social and economic development (Douala, INT- 01, 18 June 2026).

The respondent emphasizes that ethical leadership and CSR require collaboration between government institutions and private organizations. Effective policies, equal opportunities, and professional support systems are essential for increasing women's participation in leadership positions. The findings highlight that investing in women's leadership development strengthens organizational sustainability and promotes inclusive development in Cameroon. Woman Business Executive in Bamenda said ;

Ethical leadership among women can be strengthened when institutions deliberately promote core values such as integrity, accountability, transparency, and fairness in both the public and private sectors. Women leaders are more likely to demonstrate ethical behaviour when they work in environments that reward honesty, responsibility, and respect for organizational values. The government should recognize the important contributions of women entrepreneurs by providing financial assistance, low-interest business loans, grants, and capacity-building programmes that enhance their leadership, managerial, and entrepreneurial skills. Such support would enable more women to establish and expand sustainable businesses while contributing to national economic development. In addition, private organizations should move beyond viewing women merely as beneficiaries of CSR initiatives. Instead, women should be actively involved as strategic partners and leaders in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of CSR programmes. Their involvement in decision-making processes would guarantee that CSR programs are more inclusive, address community needs, and have a long-lasting social and economic impact (Bamenda, INT- 01, 18 June 2026).

This response stressed the importance of institutional support in promoting ethical leadership among women through both policy interventions and organizational practices. It emphasizes that empowering women as leaders and decision-makers in CSR initiatives enhances inclusiveness, accountability, and sustainable development. The findings suggest that collaborative efforts between government and private organizations are essential for strengthening women's leadership and maximizing the impact of CSR programmes in Cameroon. This Female Project Coordinator in Kribi accentuated that *CSR programmes should address real social challenges affecting women, such as access to education, entrepreneurship support, and professional training. Companies should involve women leaders in CSR planning because they understand community needs. The government should encourage partnerships between public institutions, private organizations, and women's associations* (Kribi, INT-01, 05 June 2026). This respondent stressed that CSR ought to address the real demands of women and their communities rather than just making charitable contributions. According to her, CSR initiatives should prioritize improving women's

access to quality education, vocational training, entrepreneurship opportunities, and skills development, as these are essential for economic empowerment and sustainable livelihoods. She argued that women leaders should actively participate in designing and implementing CSR programmes because they possess firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by women at the grassroots level. Furthermore, she stressed that the government has a critical role in fostering collaboration among public institutions, private companies, non-governmental organizations, and women's associations to ensure that CSR interventions are inclusive, well-coordinated, and responsive to local development priorities. The respondent, a Female Manager from Garoua, emphasized that

The government has a critical responsibility to strengthen monitoring and regulatory mechanisms to ensure that both public and private institutions comply with ethical standards, gender equality policies, and principles of fairness. According to her, effective oversight would help reduce discrimination, promote accountability, and ensure that women have equal access to leadership positions. She further argued that private organizations should adopt transparent and merit-based recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation systems that provide equal opportunities for qualified women. In addition, she highlighted the importance of investing in leadership coaching, mentoring, and professional development programmes to equip women with the skills, confidence, and networks needed to assume higher leadership responsibilities. She stressed that many competent women remain underrepresented in leadership because they lack institutional support rather than ability (Garoua, INT- 01, 12 June 2026).

This response highlights that ethical leadership and gender inclusion require both effective government oversight and organizational commitment to fairness. Investing in transparent systems and leadership development can significantly increase women's representation in leadership and strengthen corporate social responsibility outcomes.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The findings demonstrate that CSR and ethical leadership significantly enhance women's leadership effectiveness in organizations across Cameroon. Participants reported that organizations with strong CSR practices provide supportive environments that promote women's professional growth, leadership opportunities, and inclusive decision-making. These findings support Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes creating value for employees and other stakeholders while strengthening organizational sustainability. CSR extends beyond philanthropy by promoting equality, employee development, and inclusive leadership. This finding is consistent with Aguinis and Glavas (2024), who argue that contemporary CSR creates long-term organizational value by investing in employees, promoting inclusion, and strengthening stakeholder relationships that contribute to sustainable organizational performance. Women indicated that CSR-oriented organizations invest in leadership training, mentoring, scholarships, coaching, and continuous

professional development. These initiatives improve managerial competencies, confidence, and readiness for senior leadership positions while supporting Social Role Theory by reducing barriers that limit women's advancement. Participants also emphasized that CSR promotes work-life balance through flexible work arrangements, parental leave, wellness programmes, childcare support, and mental health initiatives. Such practices reduce workplace stress, improve job satisfaction, and enhance leadership performance. These findings are supported by UN Women (2024), which reports that organizations investing in women's leadership development, family-friendly workplace policies, and equal opportunities achieve greater employee engagement, leadership diversity, and institutional effectiveness.

The study further revealed that CSR strengthens diversity, equity, and inclusion by reducing discrimination and encouraging merit-based recruitment, promotion, and leadership opportunities. Inclusive organizational cultures increase trust, collaboration, innovation, and employee commitment while enabling women to contribute effectively to decision-making. Transparent promotion and performance evaluation systems also improve organizational justice and prepare qualified women for higher leadership responsibilities. Ethical leadership complements CSR by promoting integrity, accountability, fairness, honesty, transparency, and respect. Ethical leaders create organizational cultures based on trust, encourage responsible decision-making, and discourage corruption, discrimination, and abuse of authority. These findings support Ethical Leadership Theory, which argues that leaders influence followers through ethical conduct and role modelling. The results are also consistent with OECD (2023), which emphasizes that ethical governance, transparency, accountability, and inclusive leadership are fundamental drivers of organizational resilience, employee trust, and sustainable institutional performance. The findings indicate that CSR and ethical leadership reinforce one another in promoting women's empowerment, leadership capacity, organizational commitment, and sustainable development. By removing structural barriers and creating equitable opportunities, organizations enable women to realize their leadership potential while improving organizational performance and long-term sustainability. The findings further suggest that organizations that integrate CSR with ethical leadership practices are better positioned to develop inclusive leadership pipelines, strengthen stakeholder confidence, and contribute to national sustainable development goals.

V. CONCLUSION

CSR, ethics, and leadership are closely interconnected and together form the foundation of sustainable organizational development. Organizations that uphold ethical values such as integrity, accountability, transparency, and fairness are more likely to create inclusive environments where women can thrive as leaders. Effective CSR practices go beyond philanthropy by promoting equal opportunities, supporting professional development, and fostering respect for diversity and gender equality. In Cameroon, although women have made significant progress in education, business, public

administration, and civil society, they continue to face structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit their access to leadership positions. These challenges include gender stereotypes, unequal career advancement opportunities, and underrepresentation in decision-making roles. Strengthening ethical governance and embedding CSR principles into organizational policies can help address these barriers by promoting merit-based leadership, mentorship, and inclusive workplace cultures. Government institutions, private organizations, and civil society all have complementary roles in advancing these efforts through effective policies, capacity-building programmes, and accountability mechanisms. Promoting CSR and ethical leadership not only enhances organizational performance but also contributes to women's empowerment, social justice, and sustainable national development. Building organizations that value ethics, responsibility, and gender inclusion will enable more women in Cameroon to assume leadership roles and contribute meaningfully to the country's economic and social transformation.

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