Rise of Unofficial Marriages in Cameroon: Economic or Socio-Demographic Response?

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Abstract

This study aimed at analyzing the link between spouses' socioeconomic status and cohabitation in Cameroon. It helped identifying the characteristics of couples according to the formal nature of the union, determining the link between spouses' socio-economic status and the non formalization of marriages in Cameroon, as well as its evolution from 1991 to 2004. Analysis from logistic regression show that women aged 15 - 24 years are more likely to be in an informal union than those aged 25 -34 years. This possibility is higher in 1998. Bantu and semi Bantu women are more likely to involve in cohabitation than the Sudanese ones. This possibility increases from 1998 to 2004. Urban women are more likely to involve in unofficial marriages than rural ones. This possibility increases in 1998 and decreases in 2004. Women from couple with 3-10 years age gap between spouses, who are more educated, whose spouse is not economically active, are more likely to be in informal marriage than those in well-matched one. Giving the influence of the women's ethnic group, as well as the socio-economic mismatching of spouses in the non-formalization of unions, governments and other development partners and NGOs should develop sensitization actions against practices likely to encourage dowry higher cost, permissive morals. They should also develop family and premarital education. Among other limitations, research on cohabitation cannot rely on longitudinal data. Therefore, further studies are needed to determine whether cohabitation is a step towards formalization of unions, and to identify the mechanisms of action of factors that may explain the said phenomenon.

Keywords: Informal union – Mismatched couples – Cameroon

Introduction

African wedding is the culmination of a more or less lengthy process, including customary, religious and civil rights (Meekers 1992). According to studies on marriage, civil weeding ceremony appeared in Africa with colonization. Before the arrival of White men in Africa, weeding ceremony was traditional or religious. When there is neither civil nor religious or customary weeding ceremony, the union is called consensual union (visiting union). This kind of unions is very common in Latin America, representing nearly 50% of couples in some Central American and Caribbean countries (Locoh, 2005). They include more than (50%) of marriages in Botswana (57%) and Liberia (56.7%), and only 24.6% in Togo (Thiriat, 1999). More than a third of all marriages in Rwanda are consensual (Haguruka, 2003). In Cameroon, the magnitude of this phenomenon is increasing. Women involved in consensus union, who accounted for only 15% of women aged 15-34 in 1991, represented up to 31.45% in 1998 (DHS II), and 38.94% in 2004 (DHS III). Consensual union is mainly due to the practice of dowry in a context of significantly increasing youth unemployment. In fact, because of the economic crisis in Cameroon since the 1980s, young people face more and more problems to prepare for formal union.

Over the years, with the social changes occurring in Cameroon, traditional wedding ceremony is becoming   a business issue, with the payment of dowry as climax. In Africa in general and in Cameroon in particular, it is difficult to weed without going through the dowry. Among the Beti for instance, marriage is primarily based on the payment of dowry (Nsuba): No dowry, no marriage. The absence of "Nsuba" leads to informal marriage (Alexandre and Binet 1958, p.53, quoted by Kamdem, 2006, p.49).

The dowry, in the past symbolic, is becoming, for the girl's relatives, a mean to take as much as possible from the man planning to marry her. A study on the topic, conducted in June 2005 by the Centre for Research in Education and Social Sciences (CERDHESS) in five regions of Cameroon (North, Far-North, West, South and Adamawa), showed that the amount of the dowry is based on the level and place of the girl's education, as well as her working situation at the moment of the ceremony (Etoa 2006); dowry is also referred to as an obstacle to the formalization of marriage.

In response to this extension, new concepts ("*Come we stay*", "*Help me to live*"), appear to refer to informal or consensual marriage, or cohabitation in Cameroon, where women who represent 50.6% of the population (RGPH 2005), lag behind in almost all activities. The index of gender parity in primary school enrollment is estimated at 90 girls per 100 boys in 2004 (CDHS III). In 2007, according to Cameroon Household Survey, 95.9% female workforce is in informal sectors. Concerning public and political life, the proportion of women in public institutions is less than 30%. At judicial and legislative levels, nothing was developed for the protection of concubines. Involvement in cohabitation is rather likely to harm its members. Besides, Cameroon is a country with many ethnic groups, some of them with relatively permissive traditional socio-cultural habits, such as the Bantu; and other with rigid manners, such as the Sudanese and semi-Bantu. In the latter referred group, in which sex before marriage is repressed, early marriage is traditionally generalized, while in the other one, informal union is rather common.

Since 2006, in order to help female and male concubines to leave their unlawful situation of cohabitation and implement their desire for marriage, Cameroon officials have established, through the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Family (MINPROFF), collective weeding ceremonies, mainly aiming at securing women and children, since that Cameroon legislation does not recognize any right to women cohabitating, nor to the children who are not recognized. The practice of collective weeding ceremonies has surely increased harmony among the spouses, since that henceforth, the woman can fully focus in the common life of the family.

As part of the commitment of Cameroon for achieving the 2035 vision, which systematizes the aspirations and ambitions expressed by the various stakeholders and summarizes several points including "... a woman with a strengthened , and economically autonomous social role and a stable and harmonious family ..." all factors likely to restrain the development of women and families should be identified. From this standpoint, this article examines the role of gender inequality in unofficial marriage in Cameroon. In other words, what is the influence of socio-economic status of the partners in the fact that they do not formalize their couple? Besides, what is the influence of socio-economic status of the partners in their situation of unofficial couple?

This study, whose main objective is to better target programs and actions for the promotion of women and families, specifically aims at: i) determining the characteristics of unofficially married couples ii) identifying the link between socio-economic status of spouses and non-formalization of marriage in Cameroon, as well as its evolution from 1991 to 2004. This paper starts with a brief review of literature on unofficial couples. Then, comes the methodology, including hypothesis, conceptual aspects, data and analysis methods, as well as the results. Finally, a discussion summarizes the main results and compares them to those of previous studies.

I. Literature Review

When it emerged in the early 1970s, unofficial marriage was called juvenile cohabitation. Nowadays, the question is to know whether instead of being a temporary way of life in young couples, cohabitation is rather a radical change of behavior, leading an increasing number of adults to live together without been officially married (Leridon Gokalp 1994, quoted by Locoh, 2005). Several studies have been conducted on cohabitation in the West, but no one in Africa, where the phenomenon is growing. In fact, demographers only give limited interest to the study of marriage as an institution, weeding been mostly used in the studies of other demographic phenomena (Zourkaleini & Legrand, 2004).

Consensual union or cohabitation is characterized by stability and a certain community of life and interests close to those of official marriage. The fundamental difference between marriage and cohabitation is that the first results from an official solemn ceremony while the second is essentially a free union (Haguruka, 2003). The latter is one of the recurrent social issues, resulting to many social dysfunctions such as parental irresponsibility, instability and / or disruption of the family unit, including domestic violence, mainly against women, abandonment of children and their mothers, the growing phenomenon of street children and youth delinquency, lack of benchmarks for children, etc.

A study by Mankinwa-Adebusoye (1993) shows that in Botswana, for example, young men do not fulfill their economic obligations vis-à-vis their children abandoned with their concubines.

The theories likely to explain the increase of cohabitation include two main groups. The first group of theories, suggested by neo-classical economists, attributes the rise of cohabitation and celibacy to the low productivity of marriage. The second group, more recent, considers cohabitation as a means by couples to delay their marriage and not to "deinstitutionalize" it, given the economic situation.

In sum, for economists like Becker (1981), the development of cohabitation and the delay of marriage reflect a decline in expected benefits of marriage. This is due to the increased women's economic empowerment, resulting from a better training and better salaries. For Becker's theory, educated women are the pioneer group in adopting new demographic behaviors. Nevertheless, if in France, for example, premarital cohabitation effectively started in students and in higher classes in the 1970s, workers and jobless persons quickly joined these groups a decade after (Moors and Lesthaeghe, 1994).

Easterlin et al.'s Theory of disappointed expectations (1990) assumes that the extension of juvenile cohabitation may result from the desire for higher consumption, and even increasing one, when the economic situation of new generations of young people in the labor market is poor; in these conditions, economic constraints reinforce the propensity of cohabitation, the lack of means to perform the usual ceremonies and pay bridewealth, or, the rising of unemployment and job insecurity make that men tend to be reluctant to commit themselves formally in a marriage without any permanent income insurance (Zourkaleini and Legrand, 2004).

On the contrary, for the sociologists, marriage market should be taken into consideration. For Oppenheimer (1994), women have increased their minimum requirements from the future spouse, cohabitation or elongation of pre-marital phase resulting from a more careful choice or an evaluating period, during which the partners evaluate the compatibility of their utility functions.

Thiriat (1999), trough a systemic approach, considers that the underlying reasons for the recurrence of consensual unions are closely linked with the economic, social and cultural facts of the country. Empirical studies on cohabitation in Rwanda have shown for example that it is furthered by poverty, mutual consent, pregnancy, survival, prolonged celibacy, parental opposition, forced marriage, administrative procedures, parents' requirements, religion (Haguruka, 2003).

The possible cohabitation's factors also vary according to contexts. However, some factors, such as living in urban areas, increase the risk of cohabitation in Burkina Faso (Zourkaleini and Legrand, 2004) and in Togo (Thiriat, 1999). While the age increases the risk of opting for cohabitation in France (Prioux, 2005), women's age does not significantly vary with the type of union in Togo (Thiriat, 1999) and in Burkina Faso (Zourkaleini Legrand, 2004). According to the above mentioned studies, education, tribe, and religion significantly contribute to the choice of unofficial marriage.

The progressive change of morals has been identified in some studies as a cause of cohabitation. In fact, in Burkina Faso for example, according to 32.2% of respondents, pregnancy is a major cause of cohabitation (Zourkaleini and Legrand, 2004).

Factors related to involvement in cohabitation depend on gender. Referring to French case, Prioux (2005) shows that the factors associated with the choice between cohabitation and official marriages are not absolutely identical for men and women: greater distrust for marriage in women who have experienced their parents separation, or those who are financially empowered (besides, often the most educated), as well as in men whose spouses already have children or who are older than them; trend for marriage in graduate men. On the whole, the differences are more pronounced in men than in women. The poor importance of the degree confirms that, nowadays, unmarried cohabitation is a very little socially differentiated behavior.

The main limitation of those studies is that they only focused on causes of cohabitation outside the couple, and not on the disparities between spouses as possible causes. Henceforth, this study combines both internal and external factors. In doing so, it combines neoclassical economic theory and cultural approach.

II. Conceptual and Methodological Aspects

2.1. Assumptions and Definition of Concepts

This study is based on three assumptions:

Hypothesis 1: Cohabitation as an economic response: the formalization of a union mainly depends on the socioeconomic status of the spouses, that is to say, on their employment status and assortment at work. *Partners who take low profit from marriage opt for free union. In other words, couples who are mismatched, economically speaking, are most likely to involve in non-formal union.*

Hypothesis 2: Cohabitation as a demographic response: the formalization of the union greatly depends on the age difference between the spouses. Especially under the impact of the economic crisis and unemployment, the rise of cohabitation is more recurrent in young people whose spouses generally belong to the same generation. Couples with a low age gap between spouses are more likely to opt for unofficial union.

Hypothesis 3: Unofficial union as a social and cultural response: the formalization of the union depends on socio-cultural environment and on the difference in education in the partners. *I*n societies with traditional permissive socio-cultural mores, and in which dowry is high, people tend to opt for unofficial marriage. Bantu Women are more likely to involve in unofficial union than those of other ethnic groups. As important acculturation factors, education and urbanization facilitate modernization, and educated people are more likely to leave their traditional socio-cultural norms and values. Therefore, we assume that, more educated the spouses are, more likely to opt for unofficial marriage they are.

The measurement of the main variables in this study is as follows:

Non-formal or free union is a kind of union between a man and a woman living together as husband and wife, but without any marital commitment (traditional, civil or religious).

The socio-economic and demographic status of the spouses reveals the household's situation or its social and economic position. Given the high risk of bias on the incomes related data, in this study, the socioeconomic status is analyzed in terms of social class, occupation, as well as the level of education. From this point of view, this concept means the age gap between spouses, the educational level as well as their occupation.

The socio-cultural context refers to the socio-cultural environment in which a set of socio-cultural norms and values are defined to govern the people's behavior. It means here ethnic membership.

2.2. Data and Methods

The study is based on sample of data from three population health surveys conducted in Cameroon in 1991, 1998, and 2004 (CHDSI, CHDSII and CHDSIII). Each collection of data was done by means of a direct interview based on a questionnaire. For each of CDHS, the sample consists of women in union for 5 years prior the date of the survey, and aged 15-34 years at the moment of the survey. There is thus a total of 5931 women the three surveys, with 1314 in 1991; 1507 in 1998; and 3110 in 2004. Each woman in union means a couple. In other words, in a polygamous union for instance, there are as many couples as there are women. The study is therefore based on a sample of 5931 couples.

The study variable, "the non-formalization of the union", can be summarized by the following question: Are you married, or are you currently living with a man as husband and wife? The possible answers to this question are:

  1 - Yes, currently I'm married
  2 - Yes, I'm living with a man
  3 - No, I'm not in union

The third option is not taken into consideration, since the target population consists of women in union. The dependent variable is set as follows:

➢ ☐ **Formally married women**: for women who chose the first option (yes, now I'm married).
➢ ☐ **Women involved in non-formal union**: those who chose the second option (yes, I'm living with a man).

The outcome is a dichotomous variable: 0 = formal union, 1 = non-formal union.

The explanatory variables are: place of residence, woman ethnic group, woman's age, age gap between spouses, educational level of spouses as well as their occupation.

Bivariate descriptive and explanatory multivariate models are needed in this study. Descriptive bivariate analysis from determining statistics of chi-square with two crossed tables between dependent and explanatory variables to set the characteristics of couples involved in non-formal unions. The multivariate explanatory model of binary logistic regression was used to identify the link between socio-economic status of spouses and non-formalization of their union in Cameroon, beside other explanatory variables.

III. Findings: Impact of Spouses' Socio-Economic Situation on the non-Formalization of their Union

The analysis of interactions between the various variables (tables A7, A8, and A9) a priori shows that variables considered for different periods 1991, 1998 and 2004 are not interconnected.

3.1. Characteristics of Couples involved in Unofficial Unions

Whatever the studied period, the results of the bivariate descriptive analysis show that the place of residence, the women's ethnic group and age, the age gap between spouses, their level of education and occupation are significantly associated with the non-formalization of their union (tables A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 and A6).

Table A1 results show that the urban environment seems favorable for unofficial unions. In fact, in all the three periods (1991, 1998, and 2004), the proportion of cohabiting couples is higher in urban areas than in rural ones (18.26% v 11.70% in 1991, 20.16% v 10.76% in 1998, and 26.89% v 16.87% in 2004). it is visible that the difference between urban and rural areas widened between 1991 and 2004. This is particularly due to the faster development of unofficial unions in urban areas, with an increase of 9 points between 1991 and 2004, than in rural ones, with only 5 point for the same period. In both urban and rural areas, the increase was greater between 1998 and 2004.

As expected, whatever the study period, the highest proportion of couples cohabiting is recorded in Bantu women[1] (33.57% in 1998 and 47.62% in 2004) while the lowest proportion is recorded in Sudanese women[2] (2.98% in 1998 and 3.78% in 2004) (table A2). Couples with Semi-Bantu women[3] are in an intermediate position, with 12.66% in 1998 and 21.45% in 2004. The trend diagram of unofficial couple also shows that, unofficial unions, which almost stagnated between 1998 and 2004 in couples with Sudanese women, increased by 14 points and 9 points in couples with Bantu and semi-Sudanese women, respectively.

In all the three periods (1991, 1998, and 2004), the proportion of unofficial couples decreases with increasing age of the woman (table A3). In 1991, 18.02% of woman of unofficial couples are 15-24 years old against 13.96% for those 25-34 years old. These proportions are 18.26% v 13.42% and 25.85% v 19.20% in 1998 and 2004 respectively. We also note that the difference related to age progressively widens with time, from 4 points in 1991 to 5 points in 1998 to reach 7 points in 2004.

Whatever the period observed, table A4 results show that the prevalence of unofficial marriages gradually decreases as the age gap between spouses increases. In other words, the more the man is older than the woman, less probability they have to engage in an unofficial union. In fact, in couples with age gap between spouses less than or equal to 2 years, the proportion of non-formal union is 19.45% in 1991, 28.42% in 1998, and 30.45% in 2004. These proportions are respectively 8.21%, 15.82%, and 23.89% when the age gap between spouses is 3-10 years. The lowest proportions are recorded when the age gap between spouses is 11 years and more (2.97%, 08.41%, and 13.32% in 1991, 1998, and 2004 respectively). From 1991 to 2004, the prevalence increase in unofficial unions was more noticeable in couples with 3 - 10 years age difference between spouses (15 points), than in those with less than or 2 years age gap, and those with 11 years and over gap of (11 points and 10 points respectively).

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[1] This group mainly includes women from Centre, Littoral, and East regions.
This group mainly includes women from the three northern regions of the country (Adamawa, North and Far-North)
[3] This group mainly includes women from West, North-West ant South-West regions.

Concerning the spouses' education level, (table A5) shows that, whatever the period analyzed the incidence of unofficial unions is higher in monogamous couples, and with high level of education[4]. They are closely followed by couples with the woman more educated than men. Couples with men more educated than women come third, and they are monogamous, and less educated[5]. It represents the lowest proportion. Monogamous and less educated couples less involve in cohabitation. In fact, this category did not only record the lowest proportions of unofficial unions, but also, the decrease of its prevalence, from 2.78% in 1991 to 1.22% in 1998 and to 0.16% in 2004. On the contrary, in other categories, a slight decrease of unofficial unions is recorded between 1991 and 1998, and a significant increase between 1998 and 2004. In other words, while the low level of education of both spouses tends to slow down or to eliminate the phenomenon of cohabitation, the high level of education of both partners and, to a lesser extent, the difference level of education between spouses, especially when the woman is more educated than the man, tend to encourage it.

Concerning the spouses' occupation, for the three periods (1991, 1998, and 2004), we note that the prevalence of unofficial unions is higher in couples with none of the spouses involved in an economic activity, or only the woman involved in an economic activity (35.34% in 1991, 53.13% in 1998, and 53.85% in 2004, table A6). These proportions are much smaller and closer in couples where both spouses are involved in an economic activity (11.89% in 1991, 14.69% in 1998, and 19.93% in 2004); and those with only the man involved in an economic activity (15.57% in 1991, 11.02% in 1998, and 22.79% in 2004). Thus, we note that, while couples with no spouse involved in an economic activity, or only the woman involved in an economic activity, experienced increasing cohabitation from 1991 to 1998, which almost stabilized from 1998 to 2004, couples with both partners involved in economic activity experienced a continuous increase in the said period. On the contrary, the frequency of unofficial unions in couples with only the man involved in an economic activity has a shaped "U" evolution.

3.2. Multivariate Analysis

The findings of multivariate explanatory model of binary logistic regression are found on Table 1.

Place of Residence. The net effect of the area of residence on unofficial unions is significant in 1998 and 2004, contrary to 1991, with no significant difference between couples of urban areas and those of rural ones. In 1998 and 2004, urban couples are respectively 0.84 and 0.62 times more likely to involve in unofficial unions than rural ones. According to the said above, the urban environment increases the possibility to involve in cohabitation. For Thiriat (1999), if the probability to involve in cohabitation is greater in urban residents, it is particularly due to better access of girls to school in the urban areas than in rural ones. Another explanation may be the mixing of cultures and tolerance, common in urban areas.

Woman's Ethnic Group. In both 1998 and 2004, the significant impact of belonging to an ethnic group on unofficial unions continues. In 1998, compared to couples including Sudanese women, those with Semi-Bantu and Bantu women are respectively 1.03 and 6.68 times more likely to involve in cohabitation. In 2004, this possibility is respectively 2.68 and 12.65 times. We thus note that ethnic disparities in cohabitation more widened from 1998 to 2004.

As reported by Zourkaleini and Legrand (2004) in a study in Burkina Faso, the woman's ethnic seems to be one of the most powerful variables determining the involvement in unofficial unions. Such a result is not surprising in Cameroon. In fact, in Sudanese ethnic groups, marriage is encouraged and often early (Quechon, 1985), and in the Semi-Bantu, marriage is encouraged and pre-marital sex prohibited (Kamdem, 2006). On the contrary, in the Bantu ethnic group, women enjoy more sexual freedom, sex and even pre-marital fertility are encouraged (Kamdem, 2006). Besides, the dowry's cost is high in this ethnic group, particularly when the bride is educated or economically active.

The Woman' Age. The woman's age has a significant influence on the unofficial unions in all the periods referred. In 1991, 1998, and 2004, couples including women aged 25-34 years old are respectively 0.43; 1.15; and 1.10 times more likely to involve in unofficial union than those including women aged 15 - 24 years. In other words, the possibility to involve in unofficial union is higher in young women. This possibility increased from 1991 to 1998, and almost stabilized from 1998 to 2004.

This category includes couples whose members could reach secondary school and over.
[5] This category includes couples whose members could, or could not, reach secondary school.

These results may be an effect of generation, when young people, facing crisis and unemployment on the one hand, are more likely to remain in unofficial unions instead of involve in formal ones, lacking means for dowry or to meet their responsibilities and, on the other hand, under the influence of modernization (education and urbanization), more emancipated drop some socio-cultural practices relating to marriage.

Age difference between Spouses. The age gap between spouses has a significant net effect on involvement in unofficial marriage, whatever the period referred. Couples including a 3-10 years age gap between spouses and those with an 11 years and over age difference almost have similar behavior concerning unofficial marriage during this period. On the contrary, in 1991, 1998, and 2008, compared to couples with 11 years and over age gap between the spouses, those with less than or 2 years difference are respectively 4.42; 2. 12 ; and 1.12 times more likely to involve in unofficial union. In other words, the reduction of age gap between spouses increases the possibility to involve in than unofficial union, possibility likely do decrease over the time.

This finding, consistent with our expectations, confirms that obtained with women's age. In fact, the fact that a woman is older than her spouse or younger than him for no less than to 2 years is a risk to involve in an unofficial union, risk decreases over time. In a socio-cultural in which the standard norms on marriage suggest that man should always be older than woman in a union, this result suggests that when this rule is not respected, the spouses remain in cohabitation. Over the time, they may formalize their union, mainly with the birth of the first child.

Spouses' Education The educational level of spouses does not significantly influence the formalization of the union, whatever the period referred. Compared to couples in which the man is more educated than the woman, while those in which both spouses are not educated or just have primary education (low monogamous couples), are less likely to cohabitate (81%; 69% and 98% less likely in 1998 and 2004), those in which both spouses have secondary education or high education (high monogamous) and those including whose wife is more educated than the man are more likely to involve informal union. This possibility is likely to decrease over the time.

The first thought goes towards young graduates who, facing unemployment, opt for cohabitation while expecting a job opportunity. Besides, sometimes, when the woman is more educated than a men, his parents are reluctant to the formalization of the union. For them, a highly educated woman is likely to hold power, command, whereas traditionally, man has to be the head, and then, power's holder within the household. In such a situation, the "lovers" have no option, except cohabitation. The magnitude of this phenomenon, however, tends to decrease over the time.

Spouses' Occupation. Spouses' occupations have a significant net effect on non formalization of the marriage. Compared to couples with no spouse economically active, or only the woman economic active, those with both man and woman economically active and those with only the man economically active are less likely to involve in unofficial marriage, and this in all the three periods referred. In fact, in 1991, 1998, and 2004 couples with both spouses economically active, are respectively 57%, 73%, and 62% less likely than those with no spouses economically active or only the woman economically active to involve in cohabitation.

Likewise, compared to the later, couples with only the man economically active are 49%, 80%, and 50% less likely to opt for cohabitation in 1991, 1998, and 2004 respectively.

This finding confirms the neoclassical thesis according to which unofficial marriages is due to low incomes of the couple.

Table 1: Results of Logistic Regression: Net Effects Of Independent Variables on the Non-Formalization of Unions

Variables and Methods 1991 1998 2004	1991	1998	2004
Women's Age Group of *********	***	***	***
25 – 34 years old	Ref	Ref	Ref
15 – 24 years old	1.43**	2.15***	2,10***
Woman' Ethnic Group NA ******	NA	***	***
Sudanese	NA	Ref	Ref
Bantou	NA	7,68***	13,65***
Semi- Bantou	NA	2.03**	3,68***
Place of Residence	ns	***	***
Rural	Ref	Ref	Ref
Urban	1.05 ns	1,84***	1.62***
Age Difference between Spouses	***	***	***
11 years and over	Ref	Ref	Ref
≤ 2 years	5.42***	3.12***	2.12***
3 -10 years	2.10 ns	1.30 ns	1.48***
Spouses Education's Level	***	***	***
The man more educated	Ref	Ref	Ref
monogamous low	0.19***	0.31**	0.02***
monogamous high	1.538**	1.62**	1.22 ns
The woman more educated	1.70 ns	1.73**	1.52***
spouses occupations	***	***	***
None of them or only the woman economically active	Ref	Ref	Ref
Both of them economically active	0.43***	0.27***	0.38**
Only the man economically active	0.51***	0.20***	0.48ns
Number of observations	**1314**	**1507**	**3110**
LR chi2	**158,74***	**276.72***	**794,73***
Pseudo R^2	**0.1421**	**0.2209**	**0.2488**

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS data

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at analyzing the link between spouses' socioeconomic status and cohabitation in Cameroon. It helped identifying the characteristics of couples according to the formal nature of the union, determining the link between spouses' socio-economic status and the non formalization of marriages in Cameroon, as well as its evolution from 1991 to 2004.

The analysis shows that the area of residence, woman's ethnic group, her age, the age difference between spouses, their education level and economic activities decide the choice of unofficial marriages in Cameroon.

Bantu and semi-Bantu women are more likely to involve in cohabitation than the Sudanese ones. In urban areas, people are more likely to involve in unofficial marriages than in rural ones. The probability to involve in cohabitation increases as the age of the woman decrease, as well as the age difference between the spouses. The high level of education of both spouses or of only the women increases the possibility to involve in cohabitation. The mismatched couples (only the woman economically active or none of the spouses economically active) are more likely to cohabit as well matched couples (both spouses economically active, and only the man economically active). For these factors, observed disparities tend to diminish over the time.

The link found between the place of residence, woman's ethnic group, and cohabitation is similar to that found by Zourkaleini and Legrand (2004) in a study on Burkina Faso; this result is not surprising in the case of Cameroon. In fact, in the Bantu ethnic group, the costs of the dowry are high, and increase with the level of education and working situation of the bride. The result on the age difference between spouses is similar to that found by Prioux (2005) in France. The findings on spouses' occupations corroborate those of neoclassical theory.

These results, as well as those on spouses' level of education are understandable in the context of Cameroon. In fact, in Cameroon, as well as in most sub-Saharan African countries, generally, the husband is older than his wife, he is more educated than her, and he is economically active.

The influence of the ethnic group, as well as that of age gap between spouses and their education on the choice of cohabitation suggests that governments, development partners and NGOs should carry out sensitization actions, particularly against the practice of dowry.

The results showed that the mismatched couples are more likely to involve in unofficial marriage, and this suggest the implementation of family and premarital education programs, by measures to promote self-employment in young people such as granting microloans.

The main limitation of this study on unofficial unions is that it does not enable us know is cohabitation is a step towards official marriage. It is evident that attempts of explanations have been made, but further studies through a multidisciplinary approach, including both quantitative and qualitative data can afford actually answer this question.

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Annex

Table A1: Distribution (%) of Cohabiting Couples According to the Place of Residence and Referred Period (1991, 1998, And 2004)

Area of residence	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	Informal union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole
Urban	81.74	18.26	690 (100)	79.84	20.16	615 (100)	73.11	26.89	1272 (100)
Rural	88.30	11.70	624 (100)	89.24	10.76	892 (100)	83.13	16.87	1838 (100)
chi-square Probability	0.001***			0.000***			0.000***		

Source: Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A2: Distribution (%) of Cohabiting Couples According to the Woman's Ethnic Group and the Referred Period (1991, 1998, And 2004)

Woman's Ethnic group	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	informal Union	Whole
Sudanes	NA	NA	NA	97.02	2.98	605 (100)	96.22	3.78	1298(100)
Semi-Bantu	NA	NA	NA	87.34	12.66	482 (100)	78.55	21.45	993(100)
Bantu	NA	NA	NA	66.43	33.57	420 (100)	52.38	47.62	819(100)
chi-square Probability	NA			0.000***			0.000***		

Source: Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A3: Distribution (%) of Cohabiting Couples According to the Woman's Age Group and Referred Period (1991, 1998, and 2004)

Woman's age group	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole
15 – 24 years old	81,98	18,02	383 (100)	81.74	18.26	367 (100)	74,1509	25,85	824 (100)
25 – 34 years old	86,04	13.96	931 (100)	86.58	13,42	1140 (100)	80,80	19,20	2286 (100)
chi-square Probability	0.063*			0.023**			0.000***		

Source: Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A4 : Distribution (%) of Cohabiting Couples According to the Age Gap between the Spouses and Referred Period (1991, 1998, and 2004)

Age gap between spouses	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Ens.
Gap ≤ 2	80.55	19.45	905 (100)	71.58	28.42	190 (100)	69.55	30.45	404 (100)
Difference 3- 10 years	91.79	08.21	207 (100)	84.18	15.82	746 (100)	76.11	23.89	1595 (100)
Age difference years &+	97.03	2.97	202 (100)	91.59	08.41	571 (100)	86.68	13.32	1111 (100)
chi-square Probability	0.000***			0.000***			0.000***		

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A5 : Distribution (%) of Cohabiting Couples According to the Spouses' Level of Education and Referred Period (1991, 1998, and 2004)

Spouses' Education	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	Informal union	Whole	Formal union	Informal union	Whole	Formal union	Informal union	Whole
mono low	97.22	2.78	432 (100)	98.78	1.22	410 (100)	99.84	0.16	839(100)
Mono high	76.60	23.40	470 (100)	77.11	22.89	616 (100)	70.43	29.57	2313 (100)
Woman + Educated	75.86	24,14	145 (100)	80,73	19.27	192 (100)	72.85	27.15	676 (100)
Man + Educated	84.27	15,73	267 (100)	87.20	12.80	289 (100)	80,26	19.74	1135(100)
Probability of chi-square	0.000***			0.000***			0.000***		

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A6: Distribution (%) Of Cohabiting Couples According to the Spouces' Occupation and Referred Period (1991, 1998, and 2004)

Spouses' Occupation	1991			1998			2004		
	Formal Union	Informal Union	Whole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Wole	Formal Union	Informal Union	Wole
Jobless couple	64.66	35.34	116 (100)	46,88	53.13	32 (100)	46.15	53.85	130(100)
Both of them	88.11	11.89	774 (100)	85.31	14.69	1103 (100)	80.07	19.93	3200 (100)
Man only	84.43	15.57	424 (100)	88.98	11.02	372 (100)	77.21	22.79	1633(100)
chi-square Probability	0.000***			0.000***			0.000***		

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A7: Correlation Matrix of Selected Variables for the First Period (1991)

Variables	Grouping	Milres	Ecage	Inscoup	Activcoup
Grouping	1 0000				
Milres	-0.0675*	1 0000			
Ecage	0 0137	0 0937*	1 0000		
Inscoup	-0 0000	-0 1510*	-0 1044*	1 0000	
Activcoup	-0 0001	-0 0079	0 0312	-0 0623*	1 0000

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A8 : Correlation Matrix of Selected Variables for Period II (1998)

Variables	Grouping	Ethnic group	Milres	Ecage	Inscoup	Activcoup
Groupaing	1 0000					
Ethnic group	0 0985*	1 0000				
Milres	-0 0496*	-0 1399*	1 0000			
Ecage	-0 0750*	-0 1828*	0 0213	1 0000		
Inscoup	-0 0166	0 3207*	-0 1309*	-0 1224*	1 0000	
Activcoup	-0 0603*	-0 1574*	-0 1537*	0 1413*	-0 0288	1 0000

Source : Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS

Table A9: Correlation Matrix of Selected Variables for Period III (1991)

Variables	Grouping	Ethnc goup	Milres	Ecage	Inscoup	Activcoup
Grouping	1 0000					
Ethnic group	0 0774*	1 0000				
Milres	-0 0460*	-0 1024*	1 0000			
Ecage	-0 0295	-0 1738*	-0 0048	1 0000		
Inscoup	-0 0744*	0 1841*	-0 0612*	-0 0882*	1 0000	
Activcoup	-0 0492*	-0 0579*	-0 1928*	0 0616*	-0 0545*	1 0000

Source: Exploitation of 1991, 1998, and 2004 DHS