



Paper Title: Women's Rights, challenges faced by rural women and girls in the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon

Authors Name: Egbe Ndip Eyong

Affiliation: Independent Forum For The Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms in Cameroon

Email: egbendip_eyong@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article simply examines the impact, dangers and suffering faced by rural women and girls as the conflict in Southern Cameroon (Anglophone crisis) rages on. The conflict started in late 2016 between the Cameroon government armed forces and the separatists rebels Ambas (Ambazonia) which is the areas of the South West and North West regions of Cameroon aka (Southern Cameroon). The conflict has brought untold suffering to the civilian population of the region especially when it turn violent after it began as a peaceful protests by lawyers, teachers, students, and human rights activists, who took to the streets to decry what they perceived as the gross marginalization of Anglophone language, judicial systems, educational standard and general failure to improve Anglophone political representation and some demonstrators also calling for greater autonomy and outright secession for the Anglophone regions. The gruesome violence that ensued mostly affecting civilians and especially women, girls and children by both state and non state actors has been unprecedented and continue to worsen. Rural women and girls have been unduly affected the most yet their voices have hardly been heard when it comes to the debates on the conflict and its traumatic effects. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight the ongoing violations, vulnerabilities, suffering and challenges of rural women and girls in this Anglophone crisis. The article intends to shed the light on the traumatic, psychological and

forgotten civilians, rural women and girls in this conflict. This is a qualitative study that adopts a contextually sensible approach that seek to elucidate frightening experiences as told by the women as their true account on how the war has and continued to affect them and the negative impact of this violence on their lives.

Index Terms — *Anglophone, Sexual-based Violence (SBV), Ambas (Ambazonian), Repression, Southern Cameroon, International Labor Organization (ILO), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Journal of International women Studies (JIWS), Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)*

The purpose of this report

This report aims to outline the challenges and dangers faced by southern Cameroonian rural women and girls as the armed conflict between the Cameroon government armed forces and the armed separatists rebels (Ambas) Ambazonia war continues. The first part looks at the structural factors driving gender-based suffering of rural women. The second part analyses the degree to which the war and occupation affect the protection of rural women rights and girls. Lastly, some recommendations or steps that should be implemented to protect rural women and girls rights from both violent groups and for the Cameroon Government to review its processes and National action plan for the rights of rural women, their peace and security protection.

INTRODUCTION

According to the UN population prospects of 2024, women account for 49.72% of the world's population. Women account for substantial proportion of the agricultural labor force, including informal work and perform the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work within families and households in rural areas. Globally women are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences and access to social structures varies. Even so women and girls in the rural areas suffer disproportionately from multi-dimensional poverty, discrimination and violence. They may be productive and enterprising as their male counterparts but are less able to access land, credit, agricultural inputs, markets and high value aggro-food chains and obtain lower prices for their crops.

Rural women constitute one fourth of the world's population. They are the vital force for rural development through the well being of families, communities and economies. Therefore it is the

foremost duty of every government, politicians and policy makers to focus on to take care of and overcome the vulnerabilities of rural women. Empowering these women is not only the right thing to do but is a critical ingredient in the fighting against gender inequality, extreme poverty, hunger and breakdown of glass ceiling for these women.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) 2018 data, women make up more than 40% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries. Despite their dominance in this sector, just 15% are landlords worldwide. This is precipitated by discriminatory social norms and entrenched patriarchy causing structural barriers. In a conflict setting this scenario becomes worsen.

Women's Rights

According to the United Nations, women's rights are the rights and entitlement claimed for women and girls worldwide. These rights are essential for achieving gender equality and ensuring that women have the right to live free from violence, slavery and discrimination, be educated, to own property, to vote and earn a fair and equal wage. Going by the universal declaration of human right, women's rights can be categorized into;

- Political rights (rights to vote, hold public office and participate in political decision making)
- Economic rights (right to work, earn equal pay, own property and have access to financial services)
- Reproductive rights (right to make decision about their own bodies including reproductive health, family planning and sexual orientation.)
- Social rights (right to education, health care, housing and freedom from discrimination)
- Cultural rights (rights to participate in cultural life, express themselves freely and preserve their culture)

Wars between nations have seen a decline in recent times but conflicts within nations are increasing and women and children are always in the crossfire as in this case of Southern Cameroon. Figures suggest that the conflict landscape has become increasingly complex, with more conflict actors operating within the same country,” (Siri Aas Rustad, Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo). Looking back to the last decade, it is clear that civil conflicts have doubled from around 30 in 2001 to around 80 in 2023. Most of these conflicts occur in poor and developing countries which usually constitute a toxic combination of flimsy institutions, corruption, inequality, poverty and

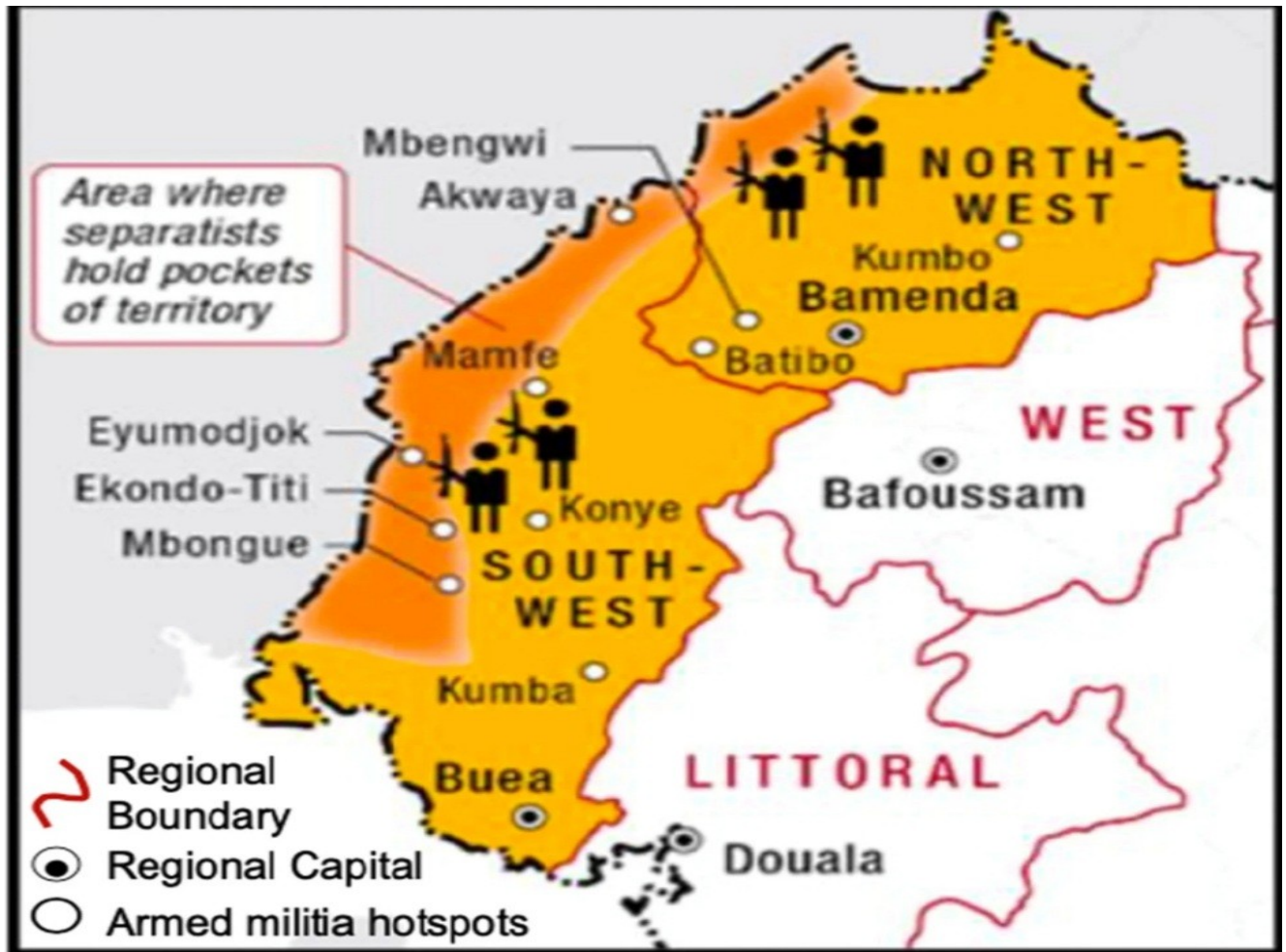
discrimination. Rural women and girls in Southern Cameroon conflict areas endure extensive incidents of sexual violence, lack of proper means of protection and survival, forced relationships, and unwilling family responsibility. Rural women and girls are most at risk during these conflicts which are politically motivated or have an ethnic origin or about identity, and by its nature war infringes on rural women's rights, invades their private space, threaten their security and identity hence they suffer extreme violence and gender abuse in this conflict.

History Of The Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

The Anglophone Cameroon conflict dates to 2016, when a protest movement comprising of lawyers, teachers and student who sought to create a two state federation that will protect the Anglophone legal and educational systems from being subsumed by their Francophone counterparts, improve Anglophone political representation, with some of the demonstrators also calling for greater autonomy or an outright secession for Anglophone regions. As the protest grew, the government held talks with teachers unions to appease Anglophone public opinion but largely ignored underlying grievances and the crisis exacerbated. On October 1st 2017, secessionist proclaimed an independent federal republic of Ambazonia, as they called the North West and South West Regions (the former British Southern Cameroons). The government authorities of Cameroon responded with a heavy handed crackdown on those they perceived secessionist sympathizers, killing dozens indiscriminately and arresting hundreds many of whom remain arbitrarily detained to date including Nsisiku Ayuk Tabe the supposed separatist leader.(Amnesty international, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2023/06/>). Which in turn spurred the formation of Anglophone militias. By the end of 2017 the crisis had degenerated into armed conflict. The crisis which began as a small-scale insurgency in major cities within a year rapidly spread to most parts of Anglophone villages which has become host grounds and hideouts for separatist fighters. This has greatly contributed to the killing, displacement and horrible living conditions of the rural population.

The situation in the North West and South West Regions remains a call for concern, characterized by violence, leading to civilians being killed, kidnapping for ransom, arbitrary arrest and destruction of properties. This has exposed many rural women and girls to human rights violations, neglect, sexual violence, exploitation, torture, physical and psychological abuse, and an increase in teenage mothers.

Vulnerability Of Rural Women In Anglophone Cameroon



Source: anglophone crisis: conceptual analysis of a looming 'Complex Disaster Emergency'

As reported by the United Nations Human Rights A/HRC/27/21 (2014) *"Conflict can result in higher levels of gender-based violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, torture, sexual violence and forced marriage. Women and girls are primarily and increasingly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war. While women and girls are in general more predominantly subject of sexual violence."*

According to the inaugural 2023 edition of "voices from Cameroon" one in two women experience gender based violence in the conflict affected areas of Cameroon. The report shows women

and girls exposure to sexual violence, emotional abuse, intimate partner violence and denial of resources with risk magnified by insecurity and the actions of state and non state armed groups. Another report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), reveals that 915,425 people in the Anglophone regions have suffered incidents of gender-based violence and do not have access to gender-based violence services, especially those who live in remote areas. As the crisis continue, both the separatist and the state armed groups use rape as a weapon of war and coerce women and girls into exploitative relations.

Rural women face unique set of vulnerabilities due to their geographic location, socioeconomic status and cultural norms. As cited above, these vulnerabilities are usually exacerbated in times of conflict or natural disasters. For the purpose of this paper their vulnerability has been classified into;

Economic vulnerability: This comprise of limited economic opportunities, dependency on agriculture and lack of access to financial services. As the livelihood of rural women and girls is centered around agricultural activities like food quest, tending fields, and fetching water and wood, in the conflict setting of Anglophone Cameroon this has made them very vulnerable to violence related sexual harassment and threat of harm or death by both parties in the conflict. Food scarcity during this war is forcing rural women and girls in these regions to travel unsafe route out of their villages in search of food thereby increasing their exposure to armed groups who often use sexual violence thereby increasing their vulnerability.

Social vulnerabilities: The already existing discriminatory culture and traditions, gender based violence and lack of access to health care facilities. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated in conflict areas.

Political vulnerabilities: These vulnerabilities can intersect in complex ways making rural women particularly vulnerable to poverty, gender base violence and social exclusion. Addressing these requires a multi-faceted approach that takes into account the unique needs and experiences of rural women.

IMPACTS OF CONFLICT ON RURAL WOMEN

In 2022 UNHCR declared a level 2 emergency in the region when 112 villages have been burned to the ground. Majority of those displaced by the crisis are women and children. Conflict can have devastating effects on rural women, exacerbating their already existing vulnerabilities and creating

new challenges for women. The impact of the Anglophone crisis on rural women can be best explain in the following classification.

Increased violence and sexual assault.

A UN report goes on to define the term conflict-related sexual violence as “rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys,” directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. The term also refers to sexual trafficking and/or exploitation “when committed in situations of armed conflict”.

The actual experience of conflict related sexual violence and the threats thereof negatively impacts the well-being of rural women and girls in ways beyond comprehension and affects their ability to care and provide for their families. Women are often targeted for sexual violence during conflict leading to physical and psychological trauma. According to the inaugural 2023 edition of “voices from Cameroon” one in two women experience gender based violence in the conflict affected areas of Cameroon. The report shows women and girls exposure to sexual violence, emotional abuse, intimate partner violence and denial of resources with risk magnified by insecurity and the actions of state and none state armed groups.

Over the past years, there has been an apparent increase in the rates of gender-based violence across the conflict-affected region. In a study, 80% of participants observed that people had been forced to have sex with someone more regularly since the beginning of the conflict. When asked if the participants were forced to have sex with someone more regularly since the outbreak of the crisis, 50% answered “yes” (out of the six interviewees who had been raped)]. (JIWS, article 8)

There is also the problem of security, Daniella observed: we don’t have security people and it’s not safe around us. We are being attacked either by the none state armed groups or the state armed groups, so the law is not protecting us...especially women, they are sexually harassed. Before the crisis, there was sexual harassment but with the crisis, there’s more, a lot of women have been harassed because security is very poor. We’re not safe anymore because the same people who are suppose to protect us are the same people abusing us. (Journal of International Women's Study, article 8, volume 25, Issue 4)

Government armed forces and separatists armed groups take advantage of defenseless women and girls when they are supposed to provide them with security. Hence, the revelations from rural women in this conflict regions shows that they are caught between the hostile government soldiers and

the aggressive separatists rebels who use their bodies as a means to assert their hegemonic manliness, yet both claim to be protecting them. The southern Cameroon crisis continues to put women especially rural women and girls in very vulnerable situations. A young girl named Jasmine agrees to this idea by stating: “there is too much fear and, also, with a lot of them being internally displaced or not having the means to get by for themselves, being vulnerable”(JIWS, article 8).

Conflict increases the vulnerability of women and girls, UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the occasion of this year’s International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict said “Conflict-related sexual violence is a devastating form of attack and repression, which has lasting, harmful effects on survivors’ physical, sexual, reproductive, and mental health, and destroys the social fabric of communities,” Many women and girls continue to suffer in this conflict and very little or nothing is being done to stop it. The cry for help is loud from these women *"They wanted to rape me. They did. A military man raped me there. My husband tried to defend us and they shot him three times in the head, stomach and chest"*. Monica 20 told amnesty international on 3 September 2021 in Ngie village, but no seems to be listening.

Displacement and loss of livelihood

Majority of those displaced by the crisis are women and children Conflict can have devastating effects on rural women, exacerbating their already existing vulnerabilities and creating new challenges for women. The rural women in Cameroon have been left without farm lands due to destruction and lack of access as a result of heightened insecurity leaving rural women without means of income.

Food insecurity

Rural women in Cameroon make up $\frac{3}{4}$ of the agricultural labor force with dominance in food crop production. With agriculture being the main livelihood activities of rural women, the interception of this singular activity has led to food shortages and malnutrition. The inability to access farm lands and food market has further worsen the situation thereby increasing the risk of food insecurity.

UN data makes clear that survivors of conflict related sexual violence do not belong to a single homogeneous group; therefore, “an inter sectional analysis and tailored, survivor-centered approaches to address their needs” are crucial. Moreover, “sexual violence curtailed women’s livelihoods and girls’ access to education while generating profits for armed and violent extremist groups”, including through conflict-driven human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The rural women of the southern Cameroon regions are feeling a constant sense of repression because the political and judicial authorities always respond to their plight with more human rights violations. Separatist leaders, civil society members including journalists continues to go on trial and/or sentenced by military tribunal for bogus terrorism related charges despite the fact that military courts have no jurisdiction over civilians per the international and human rights standards. You only have to be accused of being an armed separatist or supporting them and you will be arrested and detained.

Yet, there is hardly ever any real investigations into crimes committed and continues to be committed by both military and armed separatists leaving their victims with no an issue. Until this cases are properly investigated it will be hard to determine what level of compensation is appropriate for the victims. *“I think it has become very regular because the vulnerabilities of women and girls have increased, so there is a lot of crime and unpunished crime for that matter. Most people think that perpetrators know that they can get away with the crimes they have committed, usually with violence. So, it is like a norm.”*(Jasmine, Catholic Relief Services, 2018). So, there is the believe that perpetrators enjoy the violations they commit with impunity because they are not held accountable for their crimes. The military and security forces believe that they are doing the bidding of the government, hence there is no repercussions since the government only cares about suppressing dissidents than protection civilians, women and human rights. (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Health Challenges

Armed conflicts have deleterious effect on the health of citizens and health care delivery. Attacks on health care facilities and health care professionals including non-governmental health care workers operating in rural by both state and non state armed groups. Instances of several health workers been shoot has been reported, many assaulted on their way to work or at their job site and some kidnapped and release only after a ransom payment is made. This has caused many health workers to flee the rural settings. The consequences of this are an increased maternal mortality in rural areas due to limited access to prenatal care and safe delivery services.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This article has examined the challenges and suffering of rural women and girls in the Anglophone crisis through gender-based inequalities. Drawing from witness accounts and testimonies

in the conflict regions, it has been deduced that the violent conflict has caused enormous disruptions, women rights and sexual abuses, freedom and loss of life to rural women and girls in devastating ways.

Reducing the frequency and intensity of armed conflict is an explicit goal and a common theme of the 2030 sustainable development goal. Consequently resolving food insecurity is one of the main agendas of the sustainable development goals for the 21st century. Therefore, empowering rural women by investing in agriculture and rural development to boost the livelihoods of rural women.

The idea of gender equality has been secondary and at best ignored since the start of this conflict. The often hard but normal life of struggling civilians has become uncertain as government repression takes precedence of human dignity. Gender-based violence has more than doubled and the widespread insecurity brought on by the Anglophone conflict is beyond measure. For example, giving birth at the tender age of 13, 14, 15 is bad enough but doing so in bushes, poverty, and worst of all not knowing who is responsible for it. Rural women and girls have lost enough and if nothing is done immediately the displacements, kidnapping, rape, torture, and killings will continue.

It is well documented that gender-based violence (GBV) always increases during conflicts and war and gender inequalities are the main cause of gender-based violence, which gravely affects women and girls in conflict zones. *“Because gender inequality is now understood as one of the drivers of fragility, conflict and violence it is important to close gender gaps and create better programs for women and girls to make societies more resilient against fragility conflict and violence,”* (Diana J. Arango, *World Bank Global Lead on Gender Based Violence*). There is urgent need for the government of Cameroon to implement serious measure geared towards ending the violence on civilians, women and girls.

- Starting with unbiased investigations into all allegations of crimes and human rights violations carried out by government armed and security forces, and prosecute perpetrator after fair trials and release unconditionally and immediately all arbitrarily detained persons
- Make sure that all the people arrested because of the Anglophone crisis are quickly brought before a civilian court that upholds high trial standards of fairness, not a military tribunal.
- The government and the judicial system must protect journalists and human rights activists from threats of harm and death for reporting crimes committed during this Anglophone conflict.
- Carry out regular and serious risk assessment, review of military units and verify that arms and all relevant military supplies are used in accordance to human rights law.
- Condemn in serious terms all crimes committed government security forces, military and separatists forces and create an independent and impartial body to investigate all allegations of human rights violations and crimes committed to women and girls in Anglophone regions.

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