

BRIEFING NOTE

Women Caught in the Crossfire in Anglophone Cameroon

Canada has a role to play in Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis. With our track record of standing up against human rights abuses across the world, Canada cannot ignore the conditions faced by women in this conflict. Canada's focus on Women, Peace and Security, its Feminist International Agenda, and its history of supporting minority populations, including women, must be employed in Cameroon's case.

Cameroon's crisis, ongoing for nearly three years, has caused mass devastation. What began as a peaceful protest by Anglophone lawyers and teachers against the government's placement of French-speaking judges and teachers in English-speaking courts and schools, has deteriorated into a violent conflict and humanitarian disaster. Government security forces are battling armed separatist militias, and civilians are helplessly caught in the crossfire.

Atrocities include burning of entire villages, random shootings and extrajudicial killings, torture, amputations, and kidnappings. Hospitals are violently targeted. Schools have been closed for almost three years, leading to illiterate or radicalized youth. With 459,000 new internally displaced persons in 2018, Cameroon is now the 7th worst-affected country globally in terms of internal displacement, ranking above Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Yemen. The United Nations estimates that 1.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

This severely underreported conflict has especially harmed women and girls due to the vulnerability of displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, and school boycotts. Women have great capacity to advocate for peace in times of insecurity, but their voices are mostly neglected in Cameroon today.

Impacts on Women

Internal Displacement

Displaced women and girls, many of whom are living unprotected in the bush, have lost their livelihoods and often been separated from their husbands and families, and face abuse, humiliation, and exploitation.

- Having lost their incomes, some women engage in prostitution for money for basic needs
- Displaced women must provide not only for themselves but their children
- Soldiers have chased and beaten women for farming, accusing them of raising crops for separatist fighters
- While collecting water or food in the bush, women and girls have been sexually assaulted
- Some children have been orphaned or separated from their parents—girls, especially, are vulnerable to exploitation for survival

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

“While conflicts inflict suffering on everyone, women are particularly affected by its short- and long-term effects. Sexual assault and exploitation are frequently employed as tools of war; victimization leads to isolation, alienation, prolonged emotional trauma and unwanted pregnancies that often result in abandoned children” (CHRDA, 2019). State security forces and non-state armed groups have committed rape, sexual exploitation, public humiliation, and torture against women.

- Women travelling without national ID cards have been sexually exploited by security forces in exchange for letting them pass through checkpoints or roadblocks after 6pm curfews
- Female students at University of Buea have been molested and physically assaulted by state forces (including one female student who was raped on 28/11/2016)
- On 23/07/2018, a young breastfeeding mother was sexually assaulted by soldier Mbita Arthur at the Veterinary Junction in Bamenda
- On 21/02/2018, a woman was violently mutilated, and lost her left breast and vulva

In the two years following the escalation of the Crisis, fact-finding missions and interviews by the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) found that “[m]ore than 75 percent of women interviewed had experienced physical or sexual violence” (CHRDA/RWCHR, 2019:33). The impacts of rape and sexual assault include threats of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, along with immense psychological harm and insecurity.

These cases of sexual and gender-based violence have been compounded by a culture of impunity. Despite African jurisprudence and international laws obligating the State to protect women from sexual assault and investigate assault, “[i]n Cameroon, there is no indication of proper investigations of allegations of sexual assault or that the victims or their families have received compensation for the abuse to which these women have been subjected” (CHRDA/RWCHR, 2019: 51).

School Boycott

One tactic employed by militias is closing or burning down schools, and kidnapping or otherwise harming teachers, headmasters, or children who attend school. The Cameroonian government, despite signing the Safe Schools Declaration, has not protected schools, students, or teaching staff.

- On 25/05/2018, Principal Georgiana Enanaga of GHS Mile 16 Buea was kidnapped by suspected armed separatist group(s)
- On 12/07/2018, Principal Mary Singe of GHS Bomaka was kidnapped
- With children at home for nearly three years, mothers are additionally burdened
- In 07/2019, a woman in Tiko, South West Region, was mutilated for home-schooling her kids
- Children out of school are more prone to take up arms or be sexually abused
- Children, including girls, have been forcibly recruited into militias

Women, Peace and Security (WPS)

At the same time that women face these challenges, they also have conflict-resolution potential. According to CHRDA (2019), “women are naturally more prone to negotiate for peace than men, and in achieving this, women devise all available strategies and resources within their reach to mediate and resolve conflicts for peace to reign.” Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 recognizes the significant role that women can play in seeking peace and security.

Right now, groups such as REDHAC,* SNWOT,** Reach Out Cameroon—all led by women—are speaking out for peace and working for women’s well-being in Cameroon, contributing to a better future for their country.

Canada

Please support local groups who are working tirelessly to help vulnerable women and girls.

- Finance their projects, which will boost Canada’s WPS agenda and commitment to increase funding for Sub-Saharan Africa by 2022
- Publicly commit to funding the rebuilding of burned-down schools (\$3 million CAD would build 100 primary schools) on the condition of a ceasefire and end to the school boycott

Please add your voice to advocate for the women, girls, and all civilians who are suffering.

- Make public statements on Cameroon’s human rights situation
- Support inclusive dialogue in Switzerland and publicly offer assistance with mediation
- Bring Cameroon’s case to centre stage at The Commonwealth, La Francophonie, and the UN
- See Canada House of Commons Subcommittee news release: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/SDIR/news-release/10592031>

Please give Cameroon’s government creative ideas to manage English-French bilingualism.

*REDHAC = Network for Human Rights Defenders in Central Africa

**SNWOT = South West / North West Women’s Task Force