

Policy Paper - Cameroon

Gender-Based (Sexual) Violence: An unfolding crisis



Executive Summary

Existent societal inequality for women in Cameroon is perpetuated by the current growing crisis, resulting in a worrisome increase of (S)GBV as part of the increasing violence. The international community can no longer 'ignore' the crisis at hand, and action and awareness are crucial for the wellbeing of women and girls in Cameroon. Association Rayons de Soleil, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and Cordaid are highly concerned and urge the international community to proactively support and engage in dialogue to explore ways in which local organizations can be assisted in their fight against the rise of (S)GBV in Cameroon. This paper emphasizes that women and girls of Cameroon need the wider international community to share best practices, promote the topic of gender-based violence on the global political agenda and provide funds for the implementation of resulting as well as existing policies.

Introduction

Association Rayons de Soleil, CSPPS & Cordaid each work on Gender, Peace and Security and aim to include a gender transformative approach in all our work. In the context of the yearly High-Level Open Debate in the United Nations Security Council on ‘Sexual Violence in Conflict’, we draw attention to the worrying rise of sexual violence in conflict in Cameroon. With this policy paper, we aim to increase awareness of this growing crisis and urge international actors to put Cameroon and the rise of sexual violence higher on the agenda, and work on tangible interventions to stop the crisis that is unfolding.

Context of the crisis

The population of Cameroon, which has been under the regime of President Biya since 1982, is currently affected by several crises. Since 2014, the Far North Region has suffered from the insurgency of Boko Haram, which has left 2,000 Cameroonians dead and displaced 250,000 people within Cameroon¹. Meanwhile, the Cameroonian Civil War, more commonly known as the Anglophone Crisis, has disrupted the South West and North West Regions since 2017. This conflict is said to have claimed over 3,000 lives² and to have displaced half a million people within the country. An additional 40,000 have fled to neighbouring Nigeria³, while 855,000 children forego education due to the continuing conflict⁴, leaving 1.8 million people dependent on humanitarian aid⁵.

Cameroon is confronted with enormous security challenges provoked by political instability in neighbouring countries, unjust attacks by Boko Haram and a low level of social cohesion. The consequences of this multi-faceted situation include increasing violence, the death of innocent Cameroonians, among whom many women and children,

forced and massive displacement of populations, the destruction of entire villages, the slowing down of social and economic activities, and the proliferation of armed weapons and small calibres, all of which are likely to leave Cameroonians in insecurity and permanent fear.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected amid this turmoil in an already heavily patriarchal society. A recent CSPPS article based on an interview⁶ with Fidèle Djebba from Association Rayons de Soleil, brings to the fore the local perspective of gender inequality in Cameroon, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis.

“After having fled Boko Haram, we came here for refuge. We saw how armed men entered our village at night. They set our houses on fires and we started to run. Suddenly, they captured us, tortured us and threatened to kill us. We were raped by several men each time.... Nowadays, I just want to die. I feel like a walking cadaver. I have been rejected by my husband and by my family. I am already dead on the inside, and society looks at me differently since this has happened. I wanted to kill myself, but I told myself to pass this horrible story on to someone. Hopefully I will be remembered after my death, and people will develop strategies to prevent this kind of atrocity from happening again. So that nobody after me will have to live with this kind of shame, ever again.”
(Anonymous testimony from a gender-based violence survivor from Cameroon, August 2018)

The growing crisis of (S)GBV

Sexual violence is frequently used as a tool of war in the ongoing conflicts in Cameroon, leaving women and girls vulnerable in all aspects of life and disrupting families and communities.

Cameroonian society is heavily patriarchal, ranking 150th among a total of 189 classified countries according to the latest UNDP Gender Inequality Index. Women and girls in Cameroon depend almost entirely on male-controlled

¹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/q-boko-haram-cameroon>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52551848>

³ <https://guardian.ng/news/40000-more-flee-cameroon-conflict-to-nigeria-un/>

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-855000-children-remain-out-school-north-west-and-south-west-cameroon>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/04/renewed-attacks-aid-workers-cameroon>

⁶ <https://cspps.org/toughest-battles-Cameroon-fought-by-women-girls>

resources and assets, and are consistently inferior in terms of decision-making power. In Cameroon's strictly patriarchal society, religion, culture and tradition dictate the roles and status women can – and mostly cannot – assume. (Sexual) gender-based violence ((S)GBV) is the most harrowing symptom of this societal inequality, perpetuated heavily by the current conflict situation. At present, domestic violence and marital rape are not punishable by law, constituting a major risk to the security of women in their own homes.

In 1999, the government of Cameroon adopted the National Gender Policy of Cameroon (NGPC)⁷, as a guide and reference document for government interventions in the field to promote equality and gender equity. Cameroon has ratified several international, regional and sub-regional legal instruments on the topic, but its implementation is not optimal, and global evidence suggests that harmful social norms play a key role in perpetuating violence against women. “Many African governments have adopted gender equality as a means to promote their self-image in order to secure further development assistance, but without necessarily being committed to the political project”⁸.

One of the tools is the Maputo Protocol, which guarantees rights to women. However, the adoption of this protocol has been met with resistance, particularly from religious groups⁹.

In ratifying the Protocol, Cameroon submitted a reservation, arguing that its acceptance should “in no way be construed as endorsement, encouragement or promotion of homosexuality, abortion (except therapeutic abortion), genital mutilation, prostitution or any other practice which is not consistent with universal or African ethical and moral values, and which could be wrongly understood as arising from the rights of women to respect as a person or to free development of her personality.” The reservation illustrates the lack of support for the female position in Cameroonian society and the consequent limits to women's rights and gender equality¹⁰.

⁷ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/CAMEROON-English.pdf>

⁸ Orock, R. (2007) ‘Gender equality - whose agenda? Observations from Cameroon’, *Development in Practice*, vol. 17, n0. 1, pp. 93-97

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/status-implementation-protocol-african-charter-human-and-people-s-rights-rights-women>

WPS in Cameroon

In 2017 Cameroon launched a National Action Plan on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The framework of implementation of the NAP comprises of three organs: the piloting and orientation committee; the national technical coordination of UN SCR 1325; and the regional, divisional and sub-divisional units. Each administration is responsible for activities involving its mandate, and international organisations, private administrations and civil society organisations involved may, apart from their own funding, negotiate funding and technical support from financial and technical partners.

Thus, there is a constant struggle to implement and create support for their own work and there is not always consistency between the administrations.

By adopting the NAP, the Government of Cameroon reaffirms its commitment to improve the participation of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and to take the necessary measures for the protection of women and girls before, during and after conflicts. However, the NAP, while referencing the impact of arms proliferation on women, does not offer any specific actions for disarmament and arms control, including monitoring mechanisms for assessing the impact of arms proliferation on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Also, the NAP offers no specific framework for monitoring of the NAP implementation¹¹.

The government has not been able to implement these policies meaningfully in the field. In February 2020, in a meeting organized as preparation to the celebrations of the 35th International Women's Day, the government announced they will elaborate a multi-sectorial assessment tool of the NGPC to put in place a more effective strategy and action plan that addresses the plight of women. **Having policies in place is not sufficient, implementation is what matters. Cameroon has in the past developed strong policy with the support of the international community, but lacked the political will to implement these policies.**

¹⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/special-rapporteur-on-rights-of-women-in-africa-presentation-for-csw-implementation.pdf>

¹¹ <http://peacewomen.org/action-plan/national-action-plan-cameroon>

An unfolding crisis in need of attention and action

The Norwegian Refugee Council statement to the UN Security Council on Cameroon¹² in early 2019 reflects a common narrative. NRC Secretary General, Jan Egeland, recounts how “a group of displaced and disillusioned women I met told me that they felt abandoned by the international community, as well as by the conflict parties”.

He continues, “they asked me, where is international solidarity? Where are the African organizations, the donor nations? Where is Europe? This conflict has roots in generations of interference from European powers.” This is a signal that we, the international community, need to take very seriously.

According to a report published by NRC in June 2020, “[f]or the second year, Cameroon tops list of the most neglected crisis on the planet. Ineffective conflict resolution, global news silence and a massive aid shortfall all contributed to the country topping the 2019 list”¹³. NRC reveals that during the same year, calls for humanitarian aid from Cameroon to international partners received the least funding, and that only 43% of these calls were followed up.

On 21 February 2020, four senior UN officials issued a joint statement deploring the continued human rights abuses committed against civilians by both the army and armed groups, including women and children, in Cameroon. “Severely constrained humanitarian access and limited resources for service-providers has reduced the availability of sexual and reproductive healthcare for women, including urgent treatment for survivors of sexual violence”¹⁴.

¹² <https://www.nrc.no/news/2019/may/cameroon-unscc-statement/>

¹³ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1260983.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/un-officials-call-for-enhanced-protection-of-civilians-facing-escalating-violence-in-cameroon/>

The limits of ongoing interventions

At the moment there is a limited amount of international interventions ongoing, and the interventions that are present, are limited in their design and/or mandate. Most interventions are focused on the violence committed by Boko Haram in the far north region, but do not account for the recent increase in violence (including (S)GBV) across the country¹⁵.

For example, the mandate of the current (political) UNOWA mission is limited to address the recent increase of the violence and the increase of (S)GBV¹⁶:

- Demarcation of the land boundary and delimitation of the maritime boundary between the two countries.
- Withdrawal of troops and transfer of authority in the Lake Chad area, along the land boundary and in the Bakassi Peninsula.
- Addressing the situation of populations affected by the demarcation activities.
- Development of recommendations on confidence-building measures aiming at promoting peaceful cross-border cooperation.

Association Rayons de Soleil, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), Cordaid and partners are very concerned about the deteriorating situation in Cameroon as a result of the conflict. Lessons learned from other countries show that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Interventions to slow the increase of conflict related sexual violence are desperately needed. A major obstacle to inhibiting sexual violence is the lack of political and societal will to implement the policies that are already in place. As a result, few resources are made available for the fight against sexual violence. It is clear that interventions are necessary. Thus, more international support is needed to increase awareness of this crisis. Furthermore, an (international) debate and consultations is needed to see how the international community can support local NGOs through this unfolding crisis.

¹⁵ <https://www.refworld.org/country,,UNSC,,CMR,,592ef6944,0.html>

¹⁶ <https://unowa.unmissions.org/>

We therefore recommend

For the international community:

- The Security Council should increase monitoring of Cameroon's multi-faceted crisis and intervene, where necessary, through f.e. targeted sanctions;
- Explore opportunities to expand the current political mission UNOWA about sexual violence in conflict;
- Interventions should be focused and accountable for the increase in violence (including (S)GBV), not only in the Far North Region, but across the entire country, applying a wider scope and focus across regions in Cameroon;
- Raise awareness among donors working in Cameroon on the need for interventions on sexual violence ;
- Hold the government of Cameroon accountable for their commitments in international, national and regional policies and agreements;
- Actively collaborate/partner with the Cameroonian government regarding the implementation of international, national and regional policies and agreements, sharing resources, knowledge, and best practices according to SDG 17 through multi-stakeholder partnerships and the like);
- Provide funding for local CSOs to work on awareness campaigns on the need to implement existing policies and laws;
- Explore in consultation with local NGOs the potential added value to enlarge the mandate of the political mission with specific references to sexual violence in conflict.

For (I)NGOs:

- Put communities at the centre of the response plan for (S)GBV in conflicts zones. For example, they can help strengthen capacities of local NGO staff so that they can increase their knowledge, skills and talents to carry out interventions on (S)GBV especially in times of conflicts;
- Facilitate an enabling environment for meaningful participation to ensure the work of grassroots women and girls is amplified at the international level.

For all actors:

- Aim to support women led organizations with technical and long term and holistic financial support that can permit those organizations to better carry out their work in terms of prevention, protection and care for survivors of gender-based violence.

About

The **Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)** is a global network of civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings, jointly striving for inclusive societies and sustainable peace. We operate in more than 25 fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Cordaid is the Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid. Inspired by compassion, solidarity, and subsidiarity, we see it as our mission to reduce fragility and the vulnerability of people where it is most needed and most difficult: in fragile and conflict-affected societies.

Association Rayons de Soleil is an organization based in Cameroon created by young girls whose main mission is to promote leadership and participation of girls and women in decision-making. Since its inception in 2006, the association has carried out activities in the areas of girls' education, the fight against early marriage and women empowering. Since 2015 and following the onset of the Boko Haram crisis, the association has been committed to promoting the participation of young people and women in the construction of peace, and community leaders on violence against women and girls during conflict.