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Understanding Gender Disparity in the Conflict Affected Setting of the North West and South Regions of Cameroon



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[By Local Youth Corner Cameroon]

Understanding Gender Disparity in the Conflict Affected Settings of the North West and South West Regions

(Evidence from Focus Group Discussions)

INTRODUCTION

The Anglophone crisis in the North West and South West regions has led to a huge change in the narrative around gender perspectives in Cameroon. It has affected the political, economic and social setup of the conflict affected regions. It is worth noting that the conflict that started in 2016 has today escalated into a series of violent attacks and counter attacks from government forces and the secessionist group on the population of this region, leaving no one behind. The detrimental effect of these crises, with an increase poverty, deteriorate working conditions, worsen employment and income generating opportunities, reduce productive assets, and poor social integration, social protection and human security, greatly affect the two gender with an expand of poverty and insecurity, due to poor agricultural output. Within the context of gender disparity, the effects of the crisis in these regions have different realities to men, women, boys and girls. These realities are more evident as we notice that, Women are disproportionately impacted by conflict situations due to gender

inequalities and gender roles and responsibilities. As the crisis escalate, the government have been approaching the situation on the ground to appease Anglophone public opinion and to create conducive working and social environment in the affected regions.

This article looks at the gender situations in the midst of the crises in the two English speaking regions with focus on the responses to different political, economic, agricultural and social barriers, which prevent access to or control over resources. It examines the specific impacts of different effects of the crises to both men, women, boys and girls. This includes; natural disasters, armed conflicts, agricultural barriers, financial and economic downturns, and difficult social and political transitions, from a gender perspective. Understanding that these genders are affected differently by the crises is fundamental to this article. This is because they occupy different roles and responsibilities within a crisis setting with different effects. Women tend to be more exposed to the adverse effects of crises due to the pre-crisis patterns of poverty, their

secondary status in the labour market, over-representation in the informal-economy, lesser access to productive assets and information, and extensive domestic responsibilities; which make them economically vulnerable long before a crisis strikes.¹

Contextual Realities of Gender disparity in the SW and NW of Cameroon

In the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, Gender disparity has been a reality even before the beginning of the crisis in these regions. The dynamics and power relation between men and boys and women and girls have been consequential. Men and boys turn to play privilege roles and hold strategic positions within the communities while women and girls play supporting roles and hold minor positions. This, somehow, push the women to the margin of the community, restricting them from effectively participating in decision makings, even when it directly concerns them. However, a greater proportion of women controls the agricultural sectors within this communities, though they never have direct right to land ownership. With the coming of the Anglophone crisis, this reality only

¹ Gender in crisis response a guide to the gender-poverty-employment link tamara tutnjevic international labour office geneva november 2003

intensifies from how the socio-cultural and economic life of the people was restructured. This has kept women and young girls on a tide side, both psychologically and socio-economically.

Generally speaking, crisis affects men and women, boys and girls differently, given the different roles society ascribes them. However, Women face multiple disadvantages in crises. ² The Anglophone crisis has involved women almost from the start, and many play roles either in active combat or as part of the separatist militias' support structure.³ It stipulates that some women have taken up arms for political reasons. Others are seeking revenge for abuses they or their families have suffered at the security forces' hands. Indeed, women's roles in the insurgency, both as participants and as a social base, help explain its tenacity (2022). Women hold remarkable positions, particularly within the family circles.⁴ This place them at the center of family growth, which contributes enormously to the physical and psychological growth of the communities. The idea of gender disparity within a crisis setting is essential because it unveils the frame

² International labour office, gender in crisis response, may 2003.

³ International crisis group, rebels, victims, peacebuilders: Women in cameroon's anglophone conflict, february 2022.

⁴ Ibid

within which men, women, boys and girls are been affected. This is because the responses or behavioral patterns of men, women, boys and girls in these affected areas are different. This does not affect the equality that exists between the sexes in these regions. For example, in the Islamic religion a female is generally considered as someone who does not have responsibility because these responsibilities are likely placed on men. In terms of Education, males and females have the same rights to education even though some communities do not encourage education in Islamic regions. There are communities where women are not giving the same opportunity as men to go to school. Gender disparity is a reality in these regions in terms of religion, laws and customs. Women leadership is an issue in the context of Cameroon and this is more evident in conflict affected areas as women are not in decision making position⁵In the NW and SW regions, women rarely occupy top positions in these regions, which is slightly the case in the other regions of the country, distancing them from decision making. Women, in some of the communities within the crisis affected areas, are left out of decisions concerning the family. This indicates that women are still timid when it

⁵ Kah, h.k. And tembi, m.y., 2018. Cameroonian women in political leadership, 1960-2015. Afro asian journal of social sciences, 9(2).

comes to deciding concretely for the growth of the family. This keeps women away from sensitive issues about the family, which includes rearming boys who leave the family to join the separatist fighters. If women are given the prerogative to actively take part in decision-making, both in the community and family, they can as well actively contribute to the political, economic and social functioning of the community. Lotsmart Fonjong in an article on *Fostering Women's Participation in Development through Non-Governmental Efforts in Cameroon*, reveals that women's empowerment is currently an issue of national concern and both state and international efforts at mainstreaming women in development have so far produced mixed results. ⁶Women are actively involved in generating resources for the family. Despite the detrimental effect of the crisis on women, a considerable proportion still engage in major and minor jobs that pay bills in the family. This create a labelled ground for women to be drivers of development within the affected communities.

Another dimension of Gender disparity is seen at the level of considering persons with disability, the place of disabled people in the

⁶ Fonjong, l., 2001. Fostering women's participation in development through non-governmental efforts in cameroon. Geographical journal, 167(3), pp.223-234.

face of the crises in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon is important. This group of people face major challenges out of stigmatization and inability to constructively integrate in their communities. In an article titled *Non-Disclosure of abuse in children and young adults with disabilities(CWD): Reasons and mitigation strategies Northwest Region of Cameroon*, Glory T. Tsangue, Jacque Chirac Awa, Josephine Nsono, Charlotte W. Ayima, and Pius M. Tih assessed the reasons for non disclosure of abuse among CWD as well as proposed mitigation strategies. Understanding these provides a useful framework for empowering CWD in order to expose any subsequent abuse and further develop context-specific mitigation strategies to curb abuse among persons living with disabilities.⁷ Through a focus group discussion, including children and young adults with disabilities, parents and key informants, *Tsangue et al.* show several themes emerging as to the reason for non disclosure of abuse, as presented below. In this presentation of findings, those from children and young adults with disabilities, parents and key informants are presented together. Lack of awareness of

⁷ Glory t. Tsangue et al, non-disclosure of abuse in children and young adults with disabilities: Reasons and mitigation strategies northwest region of cameroon (2022 dec 14)

where to report According to the findings of this study, cases of abuse in CWD are rarely reported by the victims.⁸

Educationally, particular women with disability tend to suffer more and abandon their education, as a result of setbacks such as unwanted pregnancies and STDs which makes them prone to many disadvantages. Traditionally, the customs of the two affected regions restrict the active inclusion and participation of women. A glaring example is the case of the women under *Nganyang* Traditional secret group. This secret group prevent women from integrating and playing concrete roles in development processes in the different communities where they belong. This limits women's access to resources, including inheritance within these traditional settings. Some cultures have customs which are only specific to women, like Virginity testing which are generally carried out only on the girl child. This explains the idea of gender disparities in these regions. African tradition/culture, generally portray the woman as a weaker sex and therefore, considered unequal to men. This disparity is detrimental to the effective

⁸ Ibid

integration of women in their different communities. As a result, they are distanced from decision-making procedures, which makes them vulnerable in crisis situations.

Moreover, women are easily traumatized by the crisis than men. This reality is biological because scientifically women are considered weaker sex than men. In the context of the crisis under discussion, the inability to reintegrate children who leaves the family to join the separatist fighters, the gross destructions of properties and the daily killings and harassment, put women under psychological turmoil. This makes it challenging for most women to stand for their rights especially when faced with violations. Trauma, depression and emotional instability place a woman in a delicate condition, particularly in a crisis affected community. Instability limits women from playing sensitive role in their communities. *Lenore E. Walker* in *Post-traumatic stress disorder in women: Diagnosis and treatment of Battered Woman Syndrome*, looks at women as victims of marital abuse, who suffer many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He discusses the issues of diagnosis, evaluation, interviewing, and treatment as well as legal implications of the battered woman syndrome. He looks at five major areas that have been

negatively impacted by the battered woman's coping skills, including manipulation, dissociation, anger, intimacy, and compliance. Practical ways for handling each of these areas in therapy are discussed.⁹

Gender Dimensions in the Conflict

Gender is a primary determinant of social organization which shapes the social environment within which crises occur. In a crisis situation, women and men, boys and girls are affected differently. This is because society ascribes different roles and responsibilities to them. This expose them to the crises differently, thus suffer the effects of the crises differently. The gendered division of labour within the crises affected communities, for instant, makes most women less able to control resources and mitigate the effects of crises than most men. The higher incidence of poverty among women, their secondary status within the labour force, their predominance in the informal economy, their lesser access to productive assets and to information, and their extensive domestic responsibilities within these communities, clearly make them economically vulnerable. Even before the crisis occurs, gender

⁹ Lenore e. Walker, *post-traumatic stress disorder in women: Diagnosis and treatment of battered woman syndrome*, nova southeastern university (1991, 3-1)

dynamics and power relations in these areas have already shaped the state at which women and men, boys and girls are affected.

Gender perceptions and social norms in these regions shape men's roles as bread winners and protectors, and influencing their ability to cope with the crises. It is important to note that not all women are disadvantaged as not all men better off. Women and men are not homogeneous groups. Besides gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity, age and ability are equally important factors that influence the impact of crises. Despite the different nature and causes of the crises in these regions under study, their impact on men and women, boys and girls are instrument and thus, reveals some general patterns. The findings from the FGD indicates an increase in economic insecurity across these regions. This is due to the loss of productive assets, reduced access to goods and services and decreased in employment and income opportunities. This indicates that women are more likely than men to lose jobs and work time; their small businesses are affected; and their household entitlements may decline.

The findings also signal a deteriorating working conditions in these regions. This is as a result of decreasing wage levels and benefits and increasing job insecurity. This affects

both genders, but the deteriorating women's working conditions, both in paid and unpaid work, are more visible, for reasons such as lack of child-care and increased workload due to damaged infrastructure, housing and workplaces, per se. In these regions, particularly in the northwest region, women's workload increases dramatically in relation to men's. This is because women often take on more wage employment or other forms of income generating work to maintain the family livelihood. Their responsibilities have expanded as they increasingly assume care for children, the elderly and the disabled.¹⁰

The drastic decrease in educational ambiance/opportunities in these regions, as gathered from the FGD, have greatly affected men and women, girls and boys. This greatly affects already disadvantaged female children due to the additional constraints on household budgets and increased demands on their time in the household. The lack of finance to relocate for educational purpose is detrimental to the academic growth of this group of people. Also, more girls and boys tend to be pulled out of school and pushed into the work force, to complement household budgets. The finding indicates that women are hit hard by economic loss and it takes time to recover from these losses because they are less mobile,

¹⁰ *ibid*

less likely to return to paid work later, and often fail to receive equitable financial recovery assistance from the government and/or external donors.

The FGD findings indicates an increase in stress and psychological trauma in these regions throughout the crisis period. Women and girls are highly affected because such trauma is often inadequately addressed and may influence their capacity for productive work. The few services available tend to target women rather than men. There is also an indication that men's inability to live up to the ideals of masculinity affects their capacity to cope with crises and reintegrate into society, which in turn may also have negative consequences on domestic life. However, different types of crises bear specific impacts on men and women.

Actions to address the Conflict: The place of women, Men, Young Boys and girls

The role of women, men, boys and girls is vital in attaining peace and this can be enhanced through capacity building workshops. The Ministry of Youth and Civic Education (MINJEC) takes priority to organize activities that relatively build the capacities of women and men, boys and girls to be crisis resilient and actively involved in

various peacebuilding processes in these regions. In some special cases, the government uses grassroots women to talk or preach peace to the fighters in view to reshape the mindsets of the separatist fighters operating in these regions.

Previous research, like the study conducted by International Crisis Group, has suggested a number of things the government should focus on to create safe spaces for women in these crisis affected regions. These steps include; affording unfettered access to the Anglophone regions for humanitarian workers so they can bring relief to those most in need; accelerating efforts to reissue identity documents and other important civil papers that displaced people have lost during the conflict; extending economic support to women affected by the violence, particularly those who have been displaced, including through gender equity in planned measures such as land allocation to displaced people; increasing medical and psychosocial support to sexual abuse survivors; intensifying efforts to prosecute perpetrators of sexual violence; allowing women activists to campaign for a peaceful resolution of the conflict without fear of reprisal (2022).

It is evident that women in crisis affected areas have great roles to play when it

comes to countering violence. Peacebuilding cannot be sustainable when women do not play very vital roles. Their active involvement in peacebuilding process is vital because they generally respond to situations differently and most time softly because of their motherly nature. In the African culture of male domination, it is easy for women to step in and change dynamics with their authority, especially when they are at decision making levels.

Balancing the roles of gender in responding to conflict in the NW and SW

Based on evidence gather from Two FGD carried in the NW and SW, here were some of the evidence gotten for creating an enabling environment for MWBG interventions in resolving the ongoing conflict. The FGD findings is an indication that crisis response and reconstruction must promote social justice, equity and sustainable development through the empowerment of men and women, boys and girls in Northwest and Southwest regions. These findings support the fact that women's effective access to relief in these regions is often restricted by differences in social power, social esteem and physical mobility.

Strengthening the works of existing women's groups is a crucial step to ensuring gender fairness in crisis interventions. It is crucial to strengthen the work of women's organizations and help bring their voices in the formulation of national policies. Partnership can extend to diverse groups: working women's associations, environmental groups, grassroots advocacy organizations, female-dominated NGOs, and other community-based women's groups.

There is the need to promote wide social dialogue; essential to restore confidence in institutions, facilitate dialogue (inter-generational and improbable dialogues) between different factions in these regions, re-address the social dynamics towards constructive purposes, and reinforce a sense of ownership and social inclusion of the different groups and communities affected by the crises. It should involve a wide range of civil society bodies, including at the grassroots level. The visible needs to include women and their representatives in crisis-response social dialogue is critical in addressing the gender dynamics and power relations in these affected regions. Through this, the reconstruction and recovery will reflect women's strategic interests, and helps familiarize them and society with their full

participation in decision-making within these regions.

Through the FGD findings, it is evident that there is the need to involve women in labour-intensive programmes in these regions. If given the opportunity, women can and should contribute to the reconstruction of community facilities and homes destroyed during a conflict or by natural disasters, as full participants in decision-making, planning and implementation within their communities. Flexible working hours, child-care facilities and similar services facilitate women's participation.

Lastly, the FGD findings encourage the need to increase the role and responsibilities of employers' and workers' organizations in crisis management. Flexible-time and flexible-place options, counselling, on-site child-care, respite care for overburdened caregivers, and other services help crisis-impacted workers and their families recover.

CONCLUSION

In every crisis context like the "Anglophone crisis" in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, understanding gender dynamics and power relations is crucial to addressing the

detrimental effects and roles of men and women, boys and girls within the affected communities. The roles men and women play in this crisis are different because they occupy different responsibilities from the family to the community. The FGD exposed glaring realities that reveal not just the gender dynamics and power relations, but the relationships that exist between men and women, boys and girls. An analysis of the FGD findings reveals that creating a sense of understanding between people of different sexes, religions and social status will improve the material welfare of the diverse crisis-affected groups. This is critical for the long-term social healing and socio-economic reintegration of these groups, as well as to facilitate the reconstruction and economic recovery of the affected communities. Through the creation of jobs and other income generating facilities for the crisis-affected people, unparalleled opportunities will be a stringent crisis response strategy to challenge gender barriers. Integrating gender responsive analysis into crises narrative in this context, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation, through employment projects, is essential to ensure women and men have equal opportunities for decent work. It is a challenging task; and one critical for social

justice, equity, sustainable development and peace in these affected regions.

NOTES

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