



POLICY BRIEF

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

Co-authors

BALLO Ngomna

ACHALEKE Christian Leke

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

Note:

This paper draws from both FGD data and literature on the Anglophone Crisis to discuss gender roles within the context of the conflict. It examines these roles and their effects from the perspective of women and girls, and suggests courses of action.

About us:

Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC) is a youth-led civil society organization created in 2002. The organization currently applies research and capacity building among its methodologies to support youth and community development, peace building, conflict transformation, and countering/preventing violent extremism (P/CVE). Over the past years, LOYOC Cameroon has focused special attention on peacebuilding activities, facilitating dialogues and building social cohesion between communities, supporting livelihood programs as peacebuilding tools and putting young boys and girls at the forefront of processes. With the escalation of the Anglophone crisis, we strengthened our operations in the crisis-hit areas by setting up a field office in Bamenda to respond to the crisis and related conflicts.

Author: Ballo Ngomna

Editor: Achaleke Christian Leki

Publication: Local Youth Corner Cameroon

Introduction

The 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 roles of women in the political, economic, and social set-ups in these regions. As regards gender disparity, the effects of the crisis in these regions have different realities for men and women. These realities are evident in general observations that women are disproportionately impacted by conflict situations due to their gender. The International Crisis Group reports¹ that women and children have suffered hugely and stand as the most affected by the ongoing conflict in the NW and SW regions. Nevertheless, the understanding that women are affected differently by the conflict is fundamental to this paper. Women tend to occupy different roles and responsibilities within the conflict setting. They are therefore not considered victims only, but also perpetrators of violence in these regions. Since the start of the conflict, women have played many roles, either in active combat or as part of the separatist militias' support structure². It is therefore critical to examine the gender situations of women in the midst of the conflict in the NW/SW regions, with a focus on how the conflict is affecting their participation in the political and social life of the regions. This paper further examines the specific effects of the conflict on women, presents two case studies of women's efforts towards building peace in the region and suggests the way forward.

¹International crisis group report (2022) Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict

² Ibid

❖ The Gender Situations of Women within the Conflict

In the NW and SW regions, women and girls make up the majority of the population. Women under 35 make up over 70% of the female population in the region³. Gender disparity in these two regions had been a reality even before the beginning of the crisis. The dynamics and power relations between men and women as well as boys and girls have been consequential. Men and boys tend to play privileged roles and hold strategic positions within the communities, while women and girls play supporting roles and hold minor positions. This is more evident as women noted during our focus group discussion (FGD) that⁴ although they are the largest population group in the region, they tend to be less active and are often excluded from influential decision-making processes in the community. The conflict has brought to light contemporary dynamics and power relations related to the role of women in the community based on long-standing inequality and a highly patriarchal society. Women within this region face enormous cultural and

administrative barriers, ranging from economic dependence on men to a lack of jobs and limited access to social and political leadership. This situation has pushed the women in these regions to the margins of the community, restricting their effective participation in decision-making, even when it directly concerns them. The situation is even worse among young girls, who, given their youth, are considered not to have any meaningful contribution to decision-making processes. With the outbreak of the crisis in these regions, this reality has intensified and deepened the marginalisation and exposure of women and young girls as targets and victims of the conflict. This condition has kept women and young girls on edge, both psychologically and socio-economically.

Generally speaking, the conflict has greatly affected communities across the region, with both men and women as well as boys and girls exposed to violence, displacement, kidnapping, and many other crisis-specific risks, in addition to being associated as perpetrators of violence and in some cases solution providers to the conflict. Unfortunately, reports from the South West/North West Women's Task Force (SNWOT) highlight that women and young girls in these two regions suffer the most from

³ Tawe, T.I. and Bomono, H.Y., 2022. 20. The Anglophone crisis and migratory patterns in Cameroon: some social and economic implications for women. *The Elgar Companion to Gender and Global Migration: Beyond Western Research*, p.254.

⁴ LOYOC FGD respondent, Bamenda, March 2023

atrocities in the conflict as they have become "objects" of rape, abuse, and exploitation⁵.

Considering the gender disparity in the conflict, men and boys have been seen to play more of the role of combatants, with young men between 15 and 25 being actively recruited. On the other hand, women and girls are associated with roles such as cooking and informing, but rarely fighting and recruiting. Also, some women whose husbands are members of armed groups find themselves following their husbands into the forest and serve the armed groups as cooks, informants and in some cases recruiters. It has been reported that women make up about 10 percent⁶ membership within some armed groups in the NW region, and have contributed to convincing men, boys, girls and other women to join the armed group. A respondent [LOYOC FGD respondent, Bamenda, March 2023] noted that maternal validation carries significant cultural weight in the English-speaking regions, and that most children who join or exit armed groups are influenced by their mothers' support. While the use of young girls as soldiers has not yet been empirically proven, there are anecdotal suggestions that boys as young as five years

old have been used as active combatants (FGD, *ibid.*). In the midst of these realities around gender disparity in the NW and SW, women in these regions are demonstrating resilience and a strong commitment to building peace through social movements and activism.

However, a Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) discussion with young women in 2021 revealed that women's and young girls' effective participation in peacebuilding is low, especially in local communities where women are merely invited to sit without necessarily having the power to voice out their opinions and views concerning the conflict. Still, the same discussion reveals that the rate of women's satisfaction with their representation in peacebuilding was high, at 85.5%, potentially a result of the well-established and active nature of women-led organisations and the existence of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, which advocates for women's participation. Women-led movements such as Reachout, Hope for the Needy Association (HOFNA), Cameroon Women Peace Movement (COWPEM), South West/North West Women's Task Force (SNOWT), Mother of Hope Cameroon, and others have greatly contributed to advocating for women's participation in peacebuilding

⁵ Report from SNWOT Calls for peace talks over guns, 2020

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, separatist militia member, humanitarian worker, Bamenda, October 2020.

processes. In the same vein, young women's participation is best strengthened when they are associated with women-led organisations, but these organisations require capacity building to more effectively engage a wide variety of stakeholders to advocate for women's inclusion.

❖ **The Effects of the Conflict on Women and Young Girls**

It is evident that women and young girls in the conflict regions of the NW and SW are disproportionately affected. In *Women, Peace, and Security in Cameroon: The Missing Voices of the Anglophone Crisis*, Corinne Aurelie Moussi indicates that women have been vulnerable and continue to be victims of violence, including economic, physical, and sexual violence, as well as the threat of the use of such violence. The vulnerability of women and young girls is seen as they suffer from a harsh socioeconomic and political situation due to the conflict. These effects are diverse and experienced differently by women and young girls.

■ **Disenfranchising and reducing women's political participation**

Women make up the largest demographic group in the NW/SW region but remain less active and often excluded from processes that

influence community change. The conflict in these regions has brought new dynamics to the understanding of the role of women and young girls in their community, but has also been shaped by long-standing inequality and a highly patriarchal society. Women in these regions face enormous political and administrative barriers that limit their access to social and political leadership. The conflict has generally affected political life in both regions, from the disruption of electoral processes to the targeting of elected officials. Women political aspirants and voters have even suffered the most, as shared by a FGD participant. Another FGD participant noted; **"I really wanted to go and vote for my preferred candidate in the last election, but I was afraid to go out because of the several threats I saw on social media."**⁷ This situation compounds existing challenges women face in the political space. The low representation of women in the last parliamentary and senatorial elections in these regions was illustrative in this regard.

■ **Small business and economic activities**

Monday ghost towns and sporadic lockdowns of economic activities are key features of the conflict. Considering the exclusion of women

⁷ LOYOC FGD respondent, Buea, March 2023

from economic activities, women within these regions have turned to petite trading and interurban businesses. The lockdown has deprived them of their major source of income and livelihood. A market woman shared her plight with us; **"I am no longer able to feed my children since this crisis; my profit has reduced by two."** This is the reality for many women and young girls in the NW/SW regions.

■ **Increased exposure of women to violence and exploitation**

This crisis has worsened the exploitation of women, especially given linkages between poverty and domestic violence, rape, and other vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, displaced young girls from within the NW and SW regions are exposed to recruitment and participation as sex workers. A young lady in Buea described the circumstances that informed her decision to become a sex worker, explaining that she had become an IDP and had no one to help her. Our findings also show that criminal sex worker networks exploit the vulnerability of newly internally displaced girls to recruit them into sex worker syndicates. Also, women are unfortunately being cut off at the crossroads of this conflict, as they are affected but remain disregarded in

terms of their inclusion in peace processes and redress for their experiences.

■ **Recruitment and use of women and young girls as combatants and perpetrators of violence**

Unfortunately, in the context of the conflict, it has been noted that armed groups exploit the gullibility and multitasking ability of women to engage them in combat operations and intelligence gathering. Though this is a very small proportion of women, our findings suggest that it is a call for concern as noted by the International Crisis Group.

■ **The birth of women peace building champions**

In this conflict, young women peace activists face discrimination, with numerous physical and ideological barriers preventing their access to leadership roles. An Aljazeera report on Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis captures the acute protection risks young women face in the form of social stigma, threats from traditional leaders, rape threats, and a lack of dedicated protection measures. This is true as young women peacebuilders working in the NW and SW regions are persistent targets for sexual abuse and harassment, kidnappings, and other human rights violations. Much is changing as women progressively

demonstrate resilience, which has contributed to the birth of the most cohesive women's organisations in the region including SNWOT. From naming and shaming to lamentation and public advocacy, these women and girls have spoken out and contributed towards building peace in the region. Most recently, we have seen more women engage in building the capacity of other women, engaging in research, and improving the livelihoods and economic resilience of communities. The adoption of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security has created opportunities for solidarity and cooperation between women in overlapping and complementary peace actions in the regions.

Case study: Engaging and Making the voices of Women Heard

The South West/North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT), a coalition of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and civil society organisations based in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, advocates for peace by providing a "third narrative" to the Anglophone crisis that centres humanity and respect for the human being. SNWOT is at the forefront of women's voices in the two regions. Their experience and knowledge of working with women in

these regions have given them legitimacy in navigating the complex dynamics and spaces of the Anglophone crisis. Following the killing of Confort Tumassang in August 2020 and the Kumba school massacre in October 2020, SNWOT initiated a civil society-led women's protest in Kumba, where they mobilised over 1000 women and girls to protest against the killings. SNWOT has also negotiated with separatist groups and government forces to enter active conflict zones in order to provide medical, WASH, and psychosocial support to internally displaced persons. As a way of bridging divisions between women, SNWOT has engaged women from the NW and SW in social cohesion and community service activities such as cleaning and cultural exchanges where IDP women and women from host communities prepare and share food from their regions together. Today, women peacebuilders and women-led organisations from the North West and South West regions frequently convene under the umbrella of SNWOT to discuss approaches and share best practices.

Case study: Women at the Forefront of National Peace Initiatives

The Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) was created in 2019 with the vision of a Cameroon where women unite,

think, and act as one for the common good of returning sustainable peace to the country. This movement, with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, initiated the First National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon in July 2021, bringing together women from all sectors of society and from all regions of the country to pledge their commitment to peace efforts and issue demands to conflict stakeholders. In stark contrast to the identity-driven and militarised agendas of the conflicting parties, these women-led networks transcend linguistic and ethnic divisions and advocate for universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality. CAWOPEM is currently working and supporting activities around identifying international conventions and protocols on women and gender enhancement applicable in Cameroon; assessing the implementation of the specific instruments on women's political, legal, and economic rights; provisions, implementation, lapses, and perspectives; enhancing the capacity of women stakeholders on the political, legal, and economic empowerment of the Cameroonian woman; and examining the national gender policy and developing recommendations to make these more impactful.

❖ **The Way Forward for Women and Young Girls in Conflicted-affected Settings of NW/SW**

There is no doubt that the role of women and young girls in conflict-affected settings is vital to attaining peace, and this can be enhanced by bringing women on board in all peace processes and initiatives.

■ **Protecting and saving women and young girls**

According to the International Crisis Group, a number of measures can be considered to enhance the voices of women and young girls. Government and other stakeholders need to create safe spaces for women and young girls in the two affected English-speaking regions. This can be done by supporting efforts to afford humanitarian workers unfettered access to the Anglophone regions 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; increasing medical and psychosocial support to sexually abused women, especially young girl survivors; intensifying efforts to prosecute perpetrators

of sexual violence; and allowing women activists to campaign for a peaceful resolution of the conflict without fear of reprisal.

■ **Building women's capacity and financing**

Initiatives and programmes on building the capacity and financing of women and young girls in peacebuilding should be prioritised. Government and non-government bodies should make it a priority to provide opportunities and organise activities that relatively build the capacities of women and young girls to be crisis resilient and actively involved in peacebuilding processes in these regions. Women and young girls are doing incredible work, and because of the crisis, they are affected economically as their small businesses are locked down. All this places the woman in a very difficult economic situation. There is a need to provide women financial support. This can be actualized through appropriate financial support for working women's associations and community-based women's groups.

■ **Improving women's participation**

It is evident that women in crisis-affected areas have a great role to play when it comes to countering violence. Prospects of sustainable peacebuilding are weaker when

women do not play vital roles. Their active participation and the nature of their involvement in the peacebuilding process remain vital, as they generally respond to situations differently and, most of the time, softly because of their motherly nature. It is believed that it is easy for women to step in and change dynamics with their authority, especially when they are at decision-making levels. In some special cases, the government uses grassroots women to talk or preach peace to separatist fighters in order to change the mindsets of these latter operating in the affected regions. Strengthening the work of existing women's groups is crucial to ensuring women's voices are considered in crisis interventions. Such strengthening would help foreground their voices in the formulation of national policies.

■ **Access to justice for women victims**

Justice for women victims entails ensuring that they are treated with dignity, respect, and fairness throughout the legal process, and that their rights are protected and upheld. It involves holding perpetrators accountable for their actions and providing support and remedies to survivors. Within the context of the ongoing Anglophone crisis, there is a need to promote justice and wide social dialogue. More precisely, it is essential to restore

confidence and provide justice to women victims of the conflict. It will involve a wide range of civic support for women from the government, like making their voices count in decision making processes. For this reason, there is always the visible need to provide justice before including women and young girls in crisis-response social peace mechanisms as a critical step in addressing the conflict dynamics and relations of affected women. With access to justice for women victims, the way for peace in these regions would reflect the strategic interests of women, especially the victims, and would help strengthen women's full engagement in building peace in the NW and SW regions.

Conclusion

Understanding the gender disparity and power relations in the conflict-affected regions of the NW and SW is crucial to addressing the detrimental effects and roles of women and young girls affected by the conflict. This paper presents the glaring realities of women and young girls in the conflict regions who are at the margins of the community because of their gender roles. The analyses reveal that understanding gender disparity through the lens of women will improve the material welfare and recovery measures targeting these regions. This analysis is critical in

understanding the long-term social healing and socio-economic reintegration of women and young girls in these regions, as well as to government initiatives to facilitate the reconstruction and economic recovery of the affected NW and SW regions.

References

- Annan, N., Beseng, M., Crawford, G. and Kewir, J.K., 2021. Civil society, peacebuilding from below and shrinking civic space: the case of Cameroon's 'Anglophone' conflict. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21(6), pp.697-725.
- Fonjong, L., 2001. Fostering women's participation in development through non-governmental efforts in Cameroon. *Geographical journal*, 167(3), pp.223-234.
- Lenore E. Walker, Post-traumatic stress disorder in women: Diagnosis and treatment of Battered Woman Syndrome, Nova Southeastern University (1991, 3-1-)
- 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)

- Kah, H.K. and Tembi, M.Y., 2018. Cameroonian women in political leadership, 1960-2015. *Afro Asian*
- Gender In Crisis Response A Guide to The Gender-Poverty-Employment Link Tamara Tutnjevic International Labour Office Geneva November 2003 *Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2).