



Global Fund for Widows

The Widows of Cameroon

Africa's Most Neglected Human Rights
Crisis

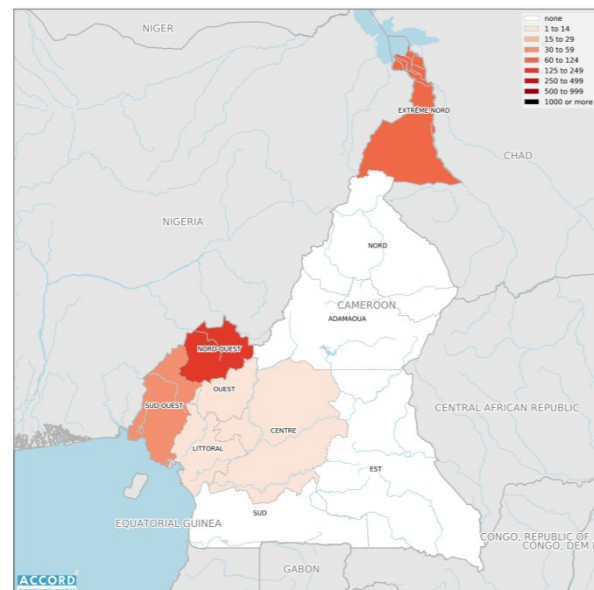
December, 2020

Cameroon's Parallel Crises

As the world has struggled to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the people of Cameroon have found themselves faced with parallel crises across the country. Throughout this humanitarian crisis harmful traditional attitudes and a weakening rule of law have left widows more vulnerable than ever. As violence and sickness continue to spread across the region, Cameroon's estimated 600,000-800,000 widows are at an increased risk for violence, discrimination, and rights abuses.

In the Far North region, Boko Haram militants have clashed with the Cameroonian army and launched coordinated attacks on civilians. This conflict has resulted in over 2,000 deaths, 260,000 displacements, widespread food insecurity, and the emergence of armed vigilante groups. Between July and September of this year the region experienced exceptionally intense flooding, destroying thousands of homes and crucial farmland.¹

In the North West and South West regions, a separate civil conflict has destabilized the region, resulting in unrest and sporadic violence since 2017. The Anglophone conflict began in October 2016 as thousands of Anglophone activists took to the streets in protest of marginalization by the nation's Francophone majority. While there have been some negotiations and concessions by the government, the crisis has steadily escalated as both sides have increased their use of violence. This conflict has seen gross violations of international humanitarian law by both sides, as separatists target schools and civilians while security forces have embarked on a brutal and indiscriminate counterinsurgency campaign. The United Nations has declared a humanitarian crisis in the region and has condemned both sides of the conflict.² A peaceful resolution to this conflict appears unlikely to materialize soon, with a report from Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies stating that "the prospects of a negotiated secession are slim, given the government's stance against federalism or secession. The most likely scenario could, therefore, be the violent repression of the separatist groups and the continuation of the unitary system with some level of decentralization."³ The continuation of violence will only worsen the region's dire humanitarian situation. With over 3,000 deaths, 600,000 displacements and 800,000 children out of school the region's civilian population is in critical need of stability.⁴



Reported Fatalities as of October 30, 2020. (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation)

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

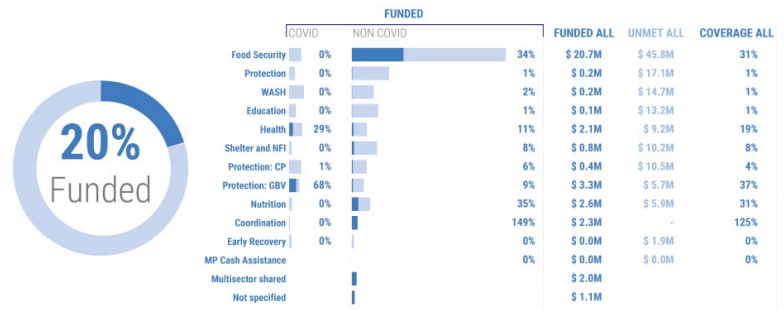
² <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/un-condemns-mass-killings-kidnappings-in-crisis-stricken-cameroon/>

³ <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Cameroon-Conflict-Insights-vol-1.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon>

Africa's Most Underfunded Humanitarian Crisis

Despite the magnitude and complexity of Cameroon's crises, relief efforts for the past several years have received only a fraction of the required funding. Per the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Cameroon's 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) received the lowest funding in all of Africa at 43.1%. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic stretching global resources the funding has fallen even shorter. As of November 2nd, only 20% of the 2020 HRP has been funded.⁵ As millions of Cameroonians remain without critical assistance, widows nationwide are amongst the most vulnerable.



Funding for Cameroon's 2020 HRP as of 11/02/2020 (OCHA)⁵

Widowhood in Cameroon

Cameroon has long been home to some of the most pervasive and culturally entrenched widow-specific harmful traditional practices in the world. Reports of disinheritance, discrimination and other harmful traditional practices targeting widows remain ubiquitous across Cameroon, especially in rural regions.

In July of 2020 widows across Western Cameroon staged protests in objection to these practices. While the protests failed to capture significant international attention, they drew sharp reactions within the region. Several local public figures spoke out against the protests, saying that the practices are necessary to protect widows from evil spirits.⁶ According to the Global Fund for Widows' local implementing partner, an NGO working in Western Cameroon (exact identity withheld for personal safety), these traditional practices continue to occur in the majority of widowhood instances. These rituals often include restricting a widow's hygiene, battery, making the widow sleep on the floor with her husband's corpse, and making a widow eat off a single plate with other widows. In addition, widows are disinherited of their marital property, leaving them with nothing. Personal descriptions of these practices are included at the end of this document.

A report prepared for CEDAW by Widows for Peace through Democracy outlines some other common traditional rites. These include "being publicly blamed for their husbands' death, being forced to prove their innocence through traditional rites, being forced to have sexual relations with husbands' relatives, being shaved ... being publicly unclothed, being segregated, being forced to beg for food". They report that since "wives are traditionally considered their husbands properties, widows become their husbands' families' properties" and as such widows much choose between marrying one their in-laws and homelessness.⁷

Widows are usually responsible for multiple children, the average Cameroonian widow registered with GFW's local partner has three children, with some having as many as twelve. Facing extreme poverty, starvation, and a lack of humanitarian aid, mothers are placed in an unthinkable situation. Per GFW's

⁵ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/cameroon/>

⁶ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/cameroon-widows-protest-harsh-traditional-practices>

⁷ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/CMR/INT_CEDAW_NGO_CM_16286_E.pdf

local partner, “widows are forced to send their children for early marriages to men old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers, some send their children out to sell their bodies to men and boys for money in order for them to survive”. Widows and their children are also extremely vulnerable to sexual assault from members of the community, especially their in-laws.

The lack of humanitarian assistance, institutionalized discrimination, and widespread poverty leave these women and their children among the world's most vulnerable persons. As conflict and instability has rocked rural communities, many widows have been forced to flee into the bush where they hide with no access to aid, basic sanitation, food, and other necessities.

COVID-19

The pandemic and its resulting constraints have resulted in an increase in gender-based violence across Cameroon, as well as the limitation of resources available for aid and development. Access to education is extremely limited, resulting in increasing illiteracy and teenage pregnancy. Widows continue to call for vocational training centers and educational opportunities so that they may provide for their children.

Financial constraints due to the pandemic have been devastating for the small entrepreneurial endeavors that many widows depend on. As a result, widows across the country have found themselves facing starvation. In response to this, GFW has deviated from its usual micro-finance focused aid to provide emergency shipments of food, cooking supplies and poultry.

International Response

The dehumanizing treatment of widows has drawn international criticism, with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) most recent concluding observations in 2014 expressing “deep concern” regarding “the stigmatization of widows and widowhood rites” and calling for the immediate implementation of a strategy to eliminate these practices. In their response, the Cameroonian Mission outlined laws which may protect widows' rights, however there is no indication that the government has taken action to implement or enforce these laws. When asked about these laws, GFW's local partner stated “In communities that I have worked, like in Bamenda (the North west Region), Buea (South West Region), Tombel (Nkupe Maninguba), Douala (the littoral Region) etc ... about 600 widows of these communities can testify that they have never seen or heard about these laws. In all the areas that I have worked ... I have never heard or seen where these laws are being enforced in a widow's life.”

In 2018 the Cameroonian government accepted a Human Rights Council (HRC) recommendation from Iceland (121.174) calling for legal provisions *specifically* criminalizing discriminatory widowhood rites.⁸ However, Cameroon has yet to implement any laws *specifically* addressing widowhood rites. In accepting Iceland's recommendation, they stated that “Provisions of the Penal Code on the protection of the physical integrity of the person sanctions discriminatory widowhood rites.” While this interpretation of the Penal Code may provide de jure protection against widowhood rites, its de facto implementation appears to be nearly nonexistent.

⁸ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/274/70/PDF/G1827470.pdf?OpenElement>



Cameroonian widows receive an emergency food shipment from GFW partners. June 2020.

Testimony from Our Partners

These testimonies contain descriptions of abuse and sexual violence.

Exact identities have been withheld for the safety of our partners. For more information on these cases please contact the Global Fund for Widows directly.

1. “When my late husband died ... may his soul rest in peace, who was a magistrate in Cameroon he died leaving behind with me two kids, the first was four years old ... and the second was just a week ... With the stress of a nursing mother and the death of my husband, (my husband’s) family still sent me away after I finished mourning and also took everything away from me ... Life became so hard and difficult for me because no one or any justice could back me up. One day my child fell sick and there was no money to administer treatment on him my child almost died because he was short of blood and there was no money to do blood transfusion and to buy drugs, so I cried until the doctor felt pity on me because of his critical condition and he commanded for an immediate treatment to commence on him and praise God! That was how my son got well. Finally, a friend borrowed me 80\$ to start a petite business to take care of me and my children and I was also doing some savings from the proceeds of my business to help send my children to school.”
 - a. “I was forced to shave every pubic part of my body, I was locked in the room for two weeks nobody could talk to me nor shared with me. I was deprived from bathing and I developed body rashes all over and was also deprived to sleep on the bed but on the floor, no form of communication was allowed, people accompanied me without communicating with me everywhere I go, for example going to the toilet. Also deprived me from an important rule of washing my hands before eating, I was robbed with palm oil all over my body according to them it was a sign to drive away evil spirits. All these practices was done on me as a nursing mother of which its a barbaric, evil and harsh practice.” – Anonymous. Dikome Balue, Ndian

2. “Her husband died while she was pregnant and had three children. This lady was sent away by her in-laws with a cutlass (sword) in the night under the rain in the gun firing situation of the country just because she refused to marry her brother-in-law. As a result, she found refuge in a Catholic church by the Father (Catholic Priest) of the church. After some few days, she was due for labour and she gave birth in the church due to the situation she was going through and some other unforeseen circumstances. Considering that she didn't leave with any of her belongings from her husband's house, she left the church where she put to birth at an ungodly hour to go and collect some of her children's dresses and also her baby's but unfortunately she was attacked on the way by armed men who brutally raped her not knowing that she just put to birth. She went through a lot of pain and trauma notwithstanding the pain she was going through from her husband's dead and also the thought of surviving with her children. Luckily enough a good Samaritan saw her in her unconscious state and took her to the hospital and that is how she survived dead and she was able to get help from the church and other well-wishers and that is how she survived and reunited again with her children. Finally, there was no justice to back up the woman in these her cases due to her lack of finance.” – Rose, 27. Mbonge, Meme Division.
3. “When a widow’s husband die his corpse is washed and the water used to bath the corpse was forcefully given to her to drink ... they wanted to know if she is the cause of her husband's death”. - Call for aid from a group of 150 widows. Santa, North West Region.
4. “Widows of the Bekom community have no right to remarried except the brothers of their late husbands. Also, the properties of their late husbands are not inherited by the widows but instead by their Nephews(by their late husband sister son)”. - Call for aid by a group of 80 widows. Bekom North West Region.
5. “Here when a widow's husband dies she is forced to sleep in the same room with her husband's corps and food is given to her on a leaf, her hair is shaved and thrown on her husband's grave and she will eat roast cocoyam with red oil for 40 days. She will also mourn her husband for 2 years until she has enough money to remove her sackcloth.” - Call for aid by a group of 60 widows. Mbangem, the Bakossians South West Region.