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The Impact of the Anglophone Crisis on Gender Equality in Cameroon

by Etumboh Nguh Cyril, Numfor Che William, and Isabel Khan¹

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Anglophone conflict on the achievement of Cameroon's goal of gender equity and equality. Since 2016, when the conflict between the Cameroonian central government and separatists took a violent turn, civilians in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon have been subjected to acts of violence by both non-state and state actors. Like in most conflicts, women and girls have been disproportionately affected; however, even though women bear the heaviest brunt of the crisis, their voices have mostly been missing from debates about the conflict and its devastating effect. This article, therefore, gives attention to the lived experiences of women in the regions affected by the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. This is to help make sense of the conflict's psychosocial impact on civilians, especially women and girls. The study is qualitative; it adopts a contextually grounded, intersectional approach which allows women to give an account of how the conflict has affected their lives and exacerbated forms of violence such as gender-based violence (GBV).

Keywords: Cameroon, Anglophone Conflict, Gender-based violence, Sexual gender-based violence, Gender Equality, Gender Equity

Introduction

Since the beginning of the conflict between the Cameroonian government and armed separatist groups of the Anglophone regions in 2016, the country's progress towards gender equality and equity has stalled. There has been a marked increase in gender-based violence (GBV), threats of violence, forced marriages, displacement, and dispossession. Before the outbreak of the conflict, Cameroon's progress towards gender equality was slow, but it was moving at a much better pace than neighboring countries. However, progress has now stalled completely. Against this backdrop, it becomes important to study the effects of the conflict on the actualization of the country's goal of gender equality. The Anglophone crisis profoundly impacts the lives of civilians in Cameroon, especially those of women and girls (International Crisis Group, October 2017). Hence, this research sheds light on the struggles encountered by women who live in or have fled Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions. This article draws on interviews conducted with women in the regions affected by the conflict to examine the gender inequalities and inequities that Cameroonian women face as a result of the ongoing crisis.

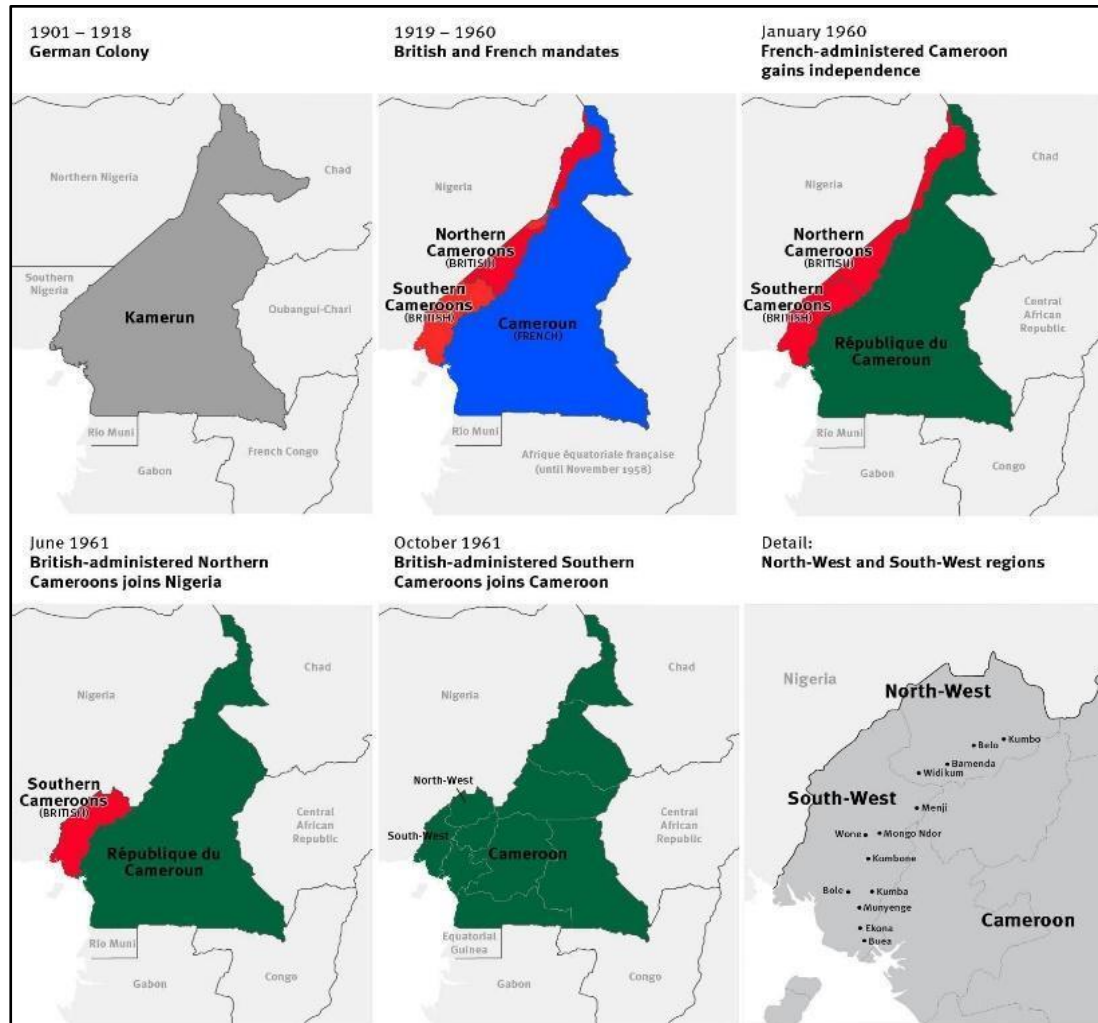
The Anglophone Crisis: A Brief History

After World War One, Cameroon, which was under German domination since 1884, became a protectorate on account of the League of Nations. Cameroon formally divided into two distinct parts (see Figure 1). The Centre-East territory was under the influence of France,

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while a second, smaller portion bordering Nigeria was granted to Great Britain (Pedneault & Sheppard, 2018). After the formation of the United Nations, the two Cameroonian domains were turned into trust territories under French and British powers in 1946. Hence, for more than 15 years, the two territories developed different social and political structures (Pedneault & Sheppard, 2018). Their respective trustees profoundly influenced their legal and administrative framework as well as their educational and cultural system. The clearest example of this development is the area of language: former British Cameroon is Anglophone (English-speaking), while former French Cameroon is Francophone (French-speaking).

Figure 1: Maps of Cameroon



Source: Pedneault & Sheppard, 2018

In 1960, riding the wave of anti-colonial movements that swept through Africa, Cameroon gained its independence from France and established the Republic of Cameroon (République du Cameroun). Simultaneously, the UN doctrine of self-determination led to a referendum in the two regions comprising British Cameroon (United Nations, 1945). The referendum of 1961 let the two regions decide if they wanted a political union with Nigeria or the Republic of Cameroon. Part of the Northern region voted for a merger with the Federation of Nigeria and thus integrated with Nigeria in June 1961 (Agwanda et al., 2020). However, the Southern region chose to join Cameroon; therefore, the Federal Republic of Cameroon was created as a two-state bilingual system in October 1961 (Okereke, 2018, p. 8).

The country's political structure changed when President Ahmadou Ahidjo abandoned the federal system, creating a unitary government in 1972. The new centralized political system was named the United Republic of Cameroon. Later, President Paul Biya renamed the country La République du Cameroun (the Republic of Cameroon); this was Cameroon's name during the French trust mandate. The initial spirit of a federation was ruled out in the eyes of opposing Anglophone elites (Okereke, 2018). The Anglophone minorities began expressing dissatisfaction about their alleged marginalization in the 1990s (Pedneault & Sheppard, 2018). Their grievances included not respecting the federal union promise, failure to conform to bilingualism in the public and education sectors, and neglect of the legal and administrative structures as well as the culture and traditions inherited from British domination.

In September and October of 2016, Anglophone lawyers and teachers took to the street in peaceful marches to protest the perceived discrimination against the educational and legal Anglophone systems (Okereke, 2018). Security forces cracked down on the demonstrations. Arrests, beatings, and violent repressions were reported on different social media platforms (Agwanda et al., 2020). The government responded to the protests by cutting Internet access and banning Anglophone groups. With the government failing to address the grievances, demonstrations extended into 2017. Human Rights Watch reported the arrest of 500 civilians and the killing of more than 20 between September and October 2017 (Pedneault & Sheppard, 2018). Following numerous government repressions, groups of armed separatists emerged throughout the Anglophone regions. They started to operate more visibly and violently, using bombings, attacks on infrastructure, assaults on schools, and kidnappings (Okereke, 2018). The current conflict is an extension of historical colonial circumstances that led to the perception of exclusion by Anglophone minorities and their resistance. Sisiku Julius Ayuktabe declared the independence of the Anglophone regions as the Republic of Ambazonia on October 1st 2017. The crisis escalated to become a full-scale conflict between Cameroon's central government and Anglophone separatist groups.

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

During the study, we conducted 11 interviews, with seven questionnaires completed online due to movement restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, lasting between 30 minutes to two hours. The data collection took place over five weeks between February and March 2021. The target population were women, aged 18 years and older, who lived in the Northwest or Southwest region during the Anglophone crisis. We conducted the interviews remotely and the questionnaires online. This meant that our interviewees were women who had access to the Internet and were IT literate. Hence, our participants were educated (high school and higher education), single, and employed or had a source of income. Consequently, while our group of respondents provided a robust view of the conflict's impact on women and girls, and how it has exacerbated inequality and precarity, their narratives only represent snapshots of life within the conflict zone. The data gathered only provide a better understanding of what the interviewed women experienced during the Anglophone crisis and do not reflect the general situation for all women who experienced the conflict. Paying attention to both big stories and small everyday narratives that emerged during the interviews, the data generated were grouped into themes to facilitate deep analysis (Phoenix, 2008). The general background information of the participants is presented in the table below (identifying information has been withheld).

Table 1: Study Participants

Name	Age	Marital Status ²	Location			Education	Occupation	Property Owner ³
			<i>Region of residence</i>	<i>Migration</i>	<i>Place of origin</i>			
Audrey	26	Single	NW	Moved once within NW region	City	20 years	Unemployed	No
Daniella	34	Married (3 children)	SW	N.A.	City	15 years	NGO	Yes
Sandra	29	Single	SW	N.A.	City	21 years	Education and NGO	Yes
Yanelle	23	Single	SW	Moved 5 times within SW region	City	20 years	Law	N.A.
Tracy	25	Single	SW	Moved 2 times from NW region	Country side	18 years	Unemployed	No
Armelle	32	Single	SW	Moved 4 times from NW region	Country side	15 years	Unemployed	No
Ketzia	32	Single (1 child)	NW	N.A.	City	19 years	Blogs, websites	Yes
Joaddan	24	Single	SW	Moved 3 times from NW region	Country side	16 years	Radio journalist	Yes
Tatiana	25	Single	NW	Moved 3 times within NW region	Country side	16 years	Student	No
Maria	24	Single	SW	Moved once from NW region	City	17 years	Self-employed (sells second-hand clothes)	No

² Including number of children³ Home owned by themselves or their family

Name	Age	Marital Status ²	Location			Education	Occupation	Property Owner ³
			<i>Region of residence</i>	<i>Migration</i>	<i>Place of origin</i>			
Sadia	42	Married (3 children)	NW	Spent 1 year in Yaoundé	City	12 years	Teacher	Yes
Maeva	24	Single	NW	Moved once from SW region	Country side	21 years	Student	Yes
Rosy	27	Single	SW	Moved once within SW region	City	18 years	Education	No
Jasmine	32	Single (1 child)	SW	N.A.	City	19 years	NGO	No
Raissa	27	Single	N.A.	Moved 5 times from NW region	City	20 years	Unemployed	No
Flore	25	Single	N.A.	Moved 2 times from NW region	Country side	N.A.	Unemployed	No
Rhoda	32	Single	Yaoundé	Moved 5 times from NW region	Country side	15 years	Unemployed	No
Hena	38	Separated (6 children)	NW	Moved 3 times, away from conflict and back to NW	Country side	20 years	NGO	No
Paula	41	Single	NW	Moved several times	Country side	N.A.	NGO	No

Intersectionality

To acknowledge that axes of identity often interact in the production of inequality and precariousness and that forms of inequality often “cluster together” (Azcona & Bhatt, 2020, p. 344), our analysis makes use of intersectionality as a point of departure. Intersectionality is a theory that is useful in examining the ways multiple axes of identity interact to create distinct and multiple forms of oppression and inequality that are often unaccounted for when a linear approach to studying how a group experiences oppression is used. In calling attention to the plight of oppressed groups, the experiences of those who are privileged in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, age, marital status, or ability are framed as the universal experience of the group. Hence the experiences of those who are more vulnerable as a result of their intersectional position get lost underneath the idea of collective suffering (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) argues that this unilineal view of group oppression is indicative of a top-down mode of analysis, and to remedy this, it is imperative to adopt a bottom-up approach that accounts for the experiences of those at the margins of already marginalized groups; for when such an approach is adopted, a more nuanced and consequently productive view of inequality would be produced. Most importantly, she writes that when events are read through the experiences of those caught at intersectional positions, it becomes possible to truly start thinking about equity (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167).

Although Kimberle Crenshaw first used the term intersectionality as a conceptual descriptor for the multiple ways in which different axes of identity often interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and violence for women of color, she was mainly naming an analytic practice that was already a part of the Black feminist critical tradition. For instance, Patricia Hill-Collins (2015) traces such hermeneutic practices to the writings of Ida Wells-Barnett, a journalist and activist who made immense contributions to critical race thinking. Names like the Combahee Collective and Gloria Anzaldua also feature on the list of scholars and activists who were attentive to the mutually constituting nature of multiple axes of identity and how they generate unique forms of oppression. However, it is impossible to write about the fame that the concept presently enjoys without acknowledging the pivotal role played by Crenshaw’s essay, “Demarginalizing the Limits of Sex, Race and Gender” (1989).

Gender equality can be defined as access to the same treatments, conditions, and opportunities for people of all genders. Further, it guarantees people the right to attain their full potential, ensure their human rights, and access equivalent resources regardless of their gender (UNICEF, 2017). The concept does not imply that women and men need to become identical. UNESCO explains that gender equality considers their “interests, needs and priorities...recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 11). Indeed, it ensures that stereotypes of gender roles and characteristics do not limit individuals’ abilities to achieve personal goals. To have a better understanding of how gender equality is understood by the women interviewed, they were asked, “How do you define gender equality?”

We can distinguish two types of gender equality: *de jure* equality and *de facto* equality. *De jure* gender equality refers to the realization of gender equality in the law, national constitutions, and legal systems, providing procedural equality (Persadie, 2012). *De facto* gender equality designates the experiences and needs of women and men in day-to-day life, in other words, the implementation of legal gender equality (Persadie, 2012). There is often a discrepancy between these definitions. Gender equality permeates the national legal systems; nevertheless, women experience unequal power relations daily (or gender inequalities) (Persadie, 2012). The discrepancy between *de facto* and *de jure* gender equality was confirmed by participants in this study. 75% of respondents disagreed with the statement, “Cameroon has achieved gender equality, meaning that men and women are equal.” The remaining participants (25%) chose to be “neutral.” Maria, one of the interviewees who was neutral, justified her

answer by stating that, even though Cameroon had not achieved gender equality, progress had been made in, for instance, “equal pay for same work done.” However, most participants (94%, with 56% strongly agreeing and 38% agreeing) still believed that “women suffer discrimination because of their gender in Cameroon.”

Gender equity refers to the process of providing fair treatments and opportunities for women and men. Hence, fair treatments are adapted to the different (or similar) interests, needs, and priorities of women and men. It requires deliberate structural changes designed to address injustices and achieve equality, which might involve the creation of a temporary state of “structured inequality” (Samoff, 1996), and “unequal distribution of resources” (Strike 1985, p. 14). This provides those affected by certain forms of historical injustices the kind of targeted support they need to reclaim their agency. Strike (1985) further observes that this means that resources “will need to be distributed not based on a criterion of ability, but a criterion of need” (p. 14). However, those measures should be temporary to positively compensate for systematic and historical gender discrimination (UNICEF, 2017). Therefore, gender equity is the process to achieve gender equality. As UNESCO describes it: “Equity is a means. Equality is the result” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 1). This maxim speaks to the fact that equality, despite being the gold standard for ideal social relations, often demands a flattening out of differences in gender, race, class, sexuality, ability/disability. Equity, on the other hand, is attentive to multiple axes of identity and how they shape needs and experiences of oppression. Given equity’s need-based processes, as well as its centrality to justice and fairness (Titi, 2021), it is a precondition for achieving equality.

Finally, for this article, we will consider the concept of gender inequality as a central concept to understand reality. The European Institute for Gender Equality defines gender inequality as the “unequal access to and control over the various material and non-material resources and assets of the society” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). In patriarchal societies such as Cameroon, women have less access and control over resources and their roles are considered inferior. Thus, they are paid less and struggle to reach decision-making positions (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021; Nkealah, 2018). Gender inequality includes the denial of equal opportunities and rights between women and men. This denial accentuates vulnerability for women and girls as it leads to discrimination in terms of health care, education, or employment (OCHA, 2020; Ndinda & Ndhlovu 2018). Also, Espinoza-Delgado and Klassen (2018) conclude that gender inequality deprives women of opportunities for full participation in economic activities, which then makes them susceptible to crushing forms of poverty, lack of agency, and gender-based violence.

Analysis and Discussion

In this article, we will focus on three of the themes that were generated during the interviews conducted. The themes are gender-based violence (GBV), access to education, and child marriage. The themes were selected due to their centrality to the fears expressed by respondents.

Fragile Masculinities and GBV

With the escalation of the ongoing conflict, women and girls are more exposed to human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), neglect, exploitation, torture, denial of resources and opportunities, psychological and physical abuse, and early marriage (International Rescue Committee, 2019). During her interview, Jasmine observed that there is an “increased number of women that are killed or shamed publicly. Trending videos show women being beheaded. There are also pregnancies from rape, amputated arms, and legs and all of that.” Over the past years, there has been an apparent increase in the rates of GBV across the conflict-affected region. According to OCHA, it is

estimated that 915,425 people in the Anglophone regions have suffered incidents of GBV and do not have access to GBV services, especially those who live in remote areas (OCHA, 2020). Nationally, a total of 2,2063,753 people need urgent medical and psychosocial GBV assistance (OCHA, 2020). In our study, 80% of our participants observed that people had been forced (physically or psychologically) to have sex with someone more regularly since the beginning of the conflict. When asked if the participants were forced to have sex with someone more regularly since the outbreak of the crisis, 50% answered “yes” (out of the six interviewees who had been raped).

The forms of precarious masculinities produced by the conflict as well as the shift in gender roles it creates could be cited as one of the reasons behind the increase in GBV. Men’s dissatisfaction at being unemployed and unable to achieve their ideals of masculinity, combined with the fact that violence against one’s wife is still socially acceptable in Cameroon, results in men resorting to domestic violence to “reaffirm their authority and domination” (Brun, 2019, p. 2). Women who take on new economic responsibilities to generate income for the family are not able to fulfill their domestic responsibilities, such as cooking or cleaning. This situation generates tension within the household and increases the risks of violence. This is what Maeva referenced when she mentioned an increase in sexual violence in her community. Indeed, she highlighted that before the conflict, boys and men were going to school or had income-generating activities, but not during the crisis. Behind her words, we can understand that men might use sexual violence as a way to regain the power lost due to the conflict (Gqola, 2016). Here, “the possession of economic power as an instrument of male domination is undermined” (Brun, 2019, p. 2). Therefore, women from the Anglophone regions believe they are more affected by domestic violence since the start of the conflict (Brun, 2019). Sadia explained that her husband has physically and sexually abused her more regularly since the beginning of the conflict (before he became paralyzed). When asked why, she clarified: “because it’s [the conflict] kept us very much in a tense atmosphere” (regarding sexual violence) and “because he has issues with the work [of her NGO against GBV and the conflict] that I’m doing, that I was going to expose him and his kids” (regarding physical violence). In Sadia’s case, her husband used more violence because she did not comply with his demand; he was scared that Sadia’s political activities would cause them problems. Hence, the tension and fear due to the Anglophone crisis led to increased GBV within households.

GBV manifests in the form of sexual violence, which has escalated and expanded since the outbreak of the conflict. Rape and any other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity are considered crimes against humanity when “committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack” (United Nations, 2021). This definition is applicable in the context of the Anglophone crisis since sexual violence has become a “weapon of war” against Anglophone women perpetrated by both government forces and non-state armed groups (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2019; Jackson, 2019). The aim of using violence as a tool of war is to spread fear and to disrupt families and communities.

In most of the interviews, women's vulnerability, and the general increase in violence in society were mentioned as reasons for rape happening more regularly in the community since the beginning of the conflict.⁴ For instance, Daniella observed that:

There are security problems; we don’t have security people and it’s not safe around us. We are being attacked either by the armed groups or the state armed groups, so the law is not protecting us...especially women, they are sexually harassed. Before

⁴ The term rape was not directly used in the questionnaire; however, it was described as “being forced physically or psychologically to have sex with someone.”

the crisis, there was sexual harassment but with the crisis, there's more, a lot of women have been harassed because security is very poor. We're not safe anymore.

Hence, women were exposed to sexual violence while security forces, armed groups, and men have the means to attack civilians. Daniella's point reveals how the women were caught between the belligerent parties, and as such, their bodies became spaces where both sides sought to assert their hegemonic masculinity. Women are in a vulnerable situation during the Anglophone crisis. Jasmine affirmed this idea by stating: "there is too much fear and, also, with a lot of them being internally displaced or not having the means to get by for themselves, being vulnerable, [not clear because of the network] has really increased it [rape]." Due to the conflict, the general violence associated with the increased vulnerability of women led to a rise in SGBV. Joaddan spoke of the example of her community to contextualize the situation:

The last time I visited my village, I was so embarrassed. You see a girl of 15 years pregnant raped by the so-called separatist fighters, just because they were threatened if they don't engage in sexual activities they will be killed. That is the normal thing that is ongoing in my village as I speak. So many girls have been impregnated by young separatist fighters because they did not have the abilities to speak for themselves, they did not have the protection, they did not have even a...how I would like to say...They did not even have a choice because they want to protect their life from them being taken away. So it [sexual violence] has drastically increased to another level, to say on a 100% it would be about 99%.

In those cases, enduring sexual violence can be a means of survival. Women are victims of sexual abuse because the only other option is death at the perpetrator's hands.

Women and girls who experience sexual violence are now more exposed to heightened risks, such as HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, physical harm, mental health issues, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions and deliveries, and stigmatization (OCHA, 2020). Displaced women and girls are the most vulnerable to sexual violence and other abuses because of their lower social and economic status (Brun, 2019). Government forces also abused displaced women and sexually exploited refugees at security checkpoints (Diamond et al., 2019). In 2019, the majority of registered survivors of sexual violence (89%) in the Southwest and Northwest regions belonged to this group (Brun, 2019).

Moreover, the curfew in the Northwest region might lead to sexual exploitation of women in informal businesses; for instance, security forces might ask them for sex in exchange for passing security checks after curfew (Diamond et al., 2019). Sex is used in exchange for releasing male family members who are abducted by armed groups (Brun, 2019). In the same way, Ketzia noticed that humanitarian agents sexually exploited girls and asked for sexual favors in exchange for providing aid. She stated:

OK, in this community, these are the vulnerable ones, these are the IDPs, as we call them, internally displaced. Then they have to distribute rice or maybe grain or something. They come, they make food, they are free, then they make you... their sex partner... They make it as a sex partner. And when they are coming out, they just call you so you can even appear two or three times to collect, when some people have never collected.

Tracy confirmed that humanitarian personnel were abusing and sexually exploiting vulnerable populations. She was coerced (physically or psychologically) to have sex with "a humanitarian whom I begged to give me a job in his organization." Furthermore, when asked why she

experienced more sexual violence during the conflict, she answered that “people take advantage of one's vulnerability of looking for a job as jobs became scarce.” Hence, sexual violence increased since the beginning of the conflict because several stakeholders (e.g., security forces, armed groups, NGO workers) take advantage of people’s needs in vulnerable situations.

The lack of proper investigations by the authorities of cases of sexual violence remains an issue. There were no instances of victims or families compensated for the abuse they suffered (Diamond et al., 2019). It has always been difficult to estimate the actual number of cases as survivors of rape and GBV rarely seek help or report their cases to authorities. The Anglophone crisis has worsened this situation; societal gender divisions and increased insecurity levels have resulted in victims refusing to denounce these types of incidents because they fear retaliation on them and their families by the military or the separatist groups (Catholic Relief Services, 2018). For Jasmine, the increase in sexual violence was linked to this lack of legal penalties against the perpetrators. She explained: “I think it has become very regular because the vulnerabilities of women and girls have increased, so there is a lot of crime and unpunished crime for that matter. Most people think that most perpetrators think that they can get away with the crimes they have committed, usually with violence. So, it is like a norm.” Thus, perpetrators enjoy widespread impunity and lack of accountability as they commit grave violations against civilians. The absence of repercussions for the military and security forces has worsened the perception of the population towards the government. They believe the government cares more about suppressing dissidents than ensuring protection and justice (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Finally, the conflict forced many women to leave their village and flee to the bush (unsettled rural areas) to ensure their safety. These women do not have access to medical assistance, and as a result, countless pregnant women have given birth in the bush (Bagnetto, 2020). This endangers the lives of the mother and the unborn child, and women have lost their babies in the process. Giving birth in the bush has become normalized for the population as well as humanitarian organisations, which distribute health kits, including rape kits, caesarian birth kits, and even bush kits for those who need them (Bagnetto, 2020).

Children's Education

By the end of 2019, there were more than 855,000 children out of school in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country (UNICEF, 2019). One of the issues of concern mentioned among interviewees was the high number of children who had not been able to attend school since the beginning of the conflict. As Joaddan highlighted, children were deprived of their right to education. Most interviewees noted that insecurity was the main reason behind school absenteeism. Maeva referred specifically to girls’ access to education, stating that they have been more affected “because, with the crisis, many people think that these girls shouldn’t go to school because of...insecurities because they are more vulnerable. So...the insecurities prevent girls from going to school.” Sadia provided a clarifying statement in which she recounted shocking incidents that have taken place in the country:

So education is not a priority as it used to be, because there is no security, children go to school...in the situation where we are, there is overcrowding in some schools, and also it is difficult to access certain areas because the schools are being closed. Again, the children were in school and a lot of insecure, from one not going to school...Because some of them are under attack, there are a lot of gunshots in the area and some of the schools are burned with the children in the schools...So you get to see that the schools are being targeted and schools are being burnt. Children who go to school are targeted. They are asked to be stripped naked by non-state actors to

dance in front of their teachers naked and to push them out into the (unclear because of network) You know, there is a lot of humiliation when it comes to school. The teachers don't have security, no psychosocial support in terms of having themselves rehabilitated, in terms of building their mental capacity. And they go to meet the same children who live in conflicting areas. So there is a lot on the ground that needs to be done.

Her words illustrate the types of violence that the armed groups are exercising over children: direct and indirect physical violence as well as psychological violence in the form of humiliation and degrading treatment. This abuse, combined with the burning down of schools, is considered a grave violation of children's rights. Ketzia's words show that schools in Cameroon's affected areas are no longer a safe space for children to thrive and learn. It is important to note that Ketzia also addressed the challenges that teachers are facing as a result of the conflict, which can result in mental issues. Teachers also do not receive enough psychosocial support, and, therefore, some of them might not be psychologically fit to be around kids. Hence, children might be at higher risk of suffering violence from their teachers as well.

Among participants who have children, two of them stated that their kids—regardless of gender—have been out of school at some point since the outbreak of the crisis. Consequently, they have tried to fill the gap in education by looking for other solutions. Daniella mentioned her son has been out of school for almost five months (at the time of the interview) and that she hired a private teacher to teach him at home. Ketzia also explained that her daughter did not attend school for almost a year until she decided to send her to another city to continue her education. According to Ketzia, her daughter and the other kids “didn't have thorough learning, they would go to school today and stay for two weeks without going to school in the [name of the city] shut down and things like that.” Thus, her daughter struggled to perform basic literacy functions, including reciting the alphabet and spelling her name. In the meantime, Ketzia resorted to learning CDs for her daughter to listen to at home, which in the end was not “very effective because I wasn't home all the time.” In the case of Sadia, she did not send her daughter to another town, but instead, her family moved to a city where schools were unaffected by the conflict. Hence, her children have been able to continue attending school.

Interviewees also addressed other consequences that children are facing while they are not at school. Young girls are now more vulnerable and at higher risk of sexual violence. Participants were asked their opinion about the following statement “if they don't go to school, girls face more sexual violence.” The answers were relatively homogeneous: 82% of participants agreed to this statement (38% strongly agree and 44% agree). As Joaddan mentioned, many young girls across conflict-affected regions in the country have had to drop out of school and have engaged in sexual activities:

Most young girls they have dropped out of school...now they engage themselves in sexual activities without knowing the devastating consequences. So it is something to be addressed by the competent authorities. It's not only in Buea, but it's also not only in my villages. I have also seen in...the remote part.

Joaddan also referred to the young boys who are not going to school and what they are doing instead, either start working in the fields or engage in harmful habits such as alcohol and drug abuse:

Children are not going to school or what they do now is the little farming for those who can still make their way to their farmland. And all of that has actually, a young boy has dropped out of school so all they can do now is engage themselves in bad societal practices: drug consumption, alcohol, and when they excess alcohol, they find doing things they are not supposed to do.

School is the first place where children are taught about gender equality and inequality. Thus, children not being able to attend school might be an obstacle to the realization of gender equality in the country. This point of view was shared by all participants, who strongly agreed (94%) or agreed (6%) with the statement “education could be a tool to prevent violence against women.” Moreover, 94% of them strongly agreed with the fact that “children at school should learn about women’s rights and gender equality.” In fact, when asked “what prevents the country from achieving gender equality,” Maeva suggested: “Start educating people on the importance of gender equality in communities...where we also...have a community where we can see an increase in the rates of gender equality.”

Child Marriage and Early Pregnancy

UNICEF’s Executive Director, Henrietta Fore observed that “when children are out of school, they face a higher risk of recruitment by armed groups, child marriage, early pregnancy and other forms of exploitation and abuse. There has been an increase in the number of girls between 14-17 years old who have been forced to get married ” (Brun, 2019, p. 2). According to a survey conducted in 2018 in the Fontem, Mamfe, and Kumba districts (Southwest Region), an estimated 58% of households know of early and forced marriages within the community (International Medical Corps, 2018). Indeed, several participants addressed the rise in child marriages. According to Maeva, there are currently a higher number of girls who have been forced to get married since marriage has become an “obligation” for them. Maria also echoed the same concern: “The crisis...has had an impact broadly, so girls in most villages and most regions right now in Cameroon have barely gone to school. Girls who have been affected by the crisis, they are given instead over to marry.”

Child marriage is also linked to unintended pregnancies. Young married girls are often pressured to start a family and are targets of sexual violence (Brun, 2019). Therefore, an increase in the number of girls getting married during the conflict would likely lead to an increase in early pregnancies. According to Human Rights Watch (2018), there has been a sharp increase in pregnancy rates among teenagers, possibly due to school absenteeism after the separatist forces enforced a boycott of education and the escalation of sexual violence against girls (Allegrozzi, 2020). Therefore, this increase in pregnancy rates is directly linked to the current conflict. As teenage mothers, they cannot attend school, and it is more difficult for them to get jobs because of their family responsibilities (Child Protection Area of Responsibility, 2019). These young girls are trapped in the cycle of poverty and economic dependency that can lead to domestic violence and GBV.

This information has been corroborated by the responses from many interviewees. Joaddan reported that the number of teenage pregnancies has dramatically increased “to another level” since the outbreak of conflict. As previously analyzed, she explained the shocking situation that is currently taking place in her village: “So many girls have been impregnated by young separatist fighters because...they did not have protection.” Joaddan noted that many of these pregnancies have resulted from girls being raped by members of the non-state armed groups. Young girls are left completely unprotected and at the hands of the armed groups, who would take advantage of their vulnerability. She also highlighted that girls living in rural and remote areas are more affected than in urban areas. This calls attention to how gender, age, and geographical location intersect to render some girls more vulnerable to

forms of sexual violence. Ketzia further reinforced this idea that the number of girls who are facing sexual abuse and becoming pregnant is high:

There are girls who have been pregnant. And you see the children who are being born now. They are born, their ages are at the ages of the crisis. Now...the conflict has made it in a way that these boys who are in the bushes, they come to the quarter, they take young girls, they impregnate them, and they disappear. Now, when they get killed, those girls have to be put to bed and cater for those children. Those are some of the problems that we are witnessing day in, day out.

This statement presents the challenges young girls and their children are facing daily. They have to take care of children born from rape, putting them in a more vulnerable position. Given that the education of girls is pivotal to the achievement of gender equality (Ezeigbo 2015), these impregnated girls might remain perpetually stuck in the cycle of poverty and oppression.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the implications of the Anglophone crisis for the achievement of gender equality. Drawing from interviews conducted with women who live or have lived in the affected regions, we have been able to call attention to the violent disruptions and loss of life, freedom, and dignity which continue to affect women and girls disproportionately. Hence, the realization of gender equality has been impeded since the beginning of the conflict. As Mefire and associates (2017) argue, “In other words, the daily life’s struggle is so worrying and hard that the intellectual, political and projection side becomes derisory.” Here, the “daily life’s struggle” refers to the GBV and general insecurity brought on by the Anglophone crisis (e.g. rape, giving birth in the bush, poverty, displacement, torture, kidnapping, and killing). Violence has become so prevalent to the extent that the projection and expectations for the socio-economic and political future of the country now look grim. Attempts to increase gender equity and achieve equality, which would have contributed to the country’s growth, have now stopped as the crisis morphed into a full-scale conflict. Instead, efforts are now focused on women's survival and the protection of people from GBV.

To end this disastrous humanitarian situation and the precarity it creates for women and children, we recommend that the Government of the Republic of Cameroon, armed separatist groups, and social and political stakeholders (NGOs and international agencies) engage in a comprehensive peace process. Also, all the key players in the conflict need to create preventive intervention and awareness programs on gender inequality and gender-based issues. We also urge all stakeholders to provide adequate medical, psychological, legal and economic assistance and remedies to victims and survivors of GBV and gender-based inequalities.

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