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COI QUERY

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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on 26 January 2022. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE - Cameroon

Situation of single women in Yaoundé and Douala



Map 1: Cameroon, source: UN¹

¹ UN, Map No. 4227 Rev. 3, April 2020, UNITED NATIONS, [url](#)

1. General situation of women in Cameroon

As noted by Freedom House and the United States Department of State (USDOS), the constitution² in Cameroon guarantees the same legal status and rights to men and women.³ However, in practice the government of Cameroon often did not enforce the law⁴, and traditional legal norms and practices prevail.⁵ Gender inequalities between men and women persist (in addition to inequalities between the rich and the poor, and between different regions), especially in accessing health, education and employment.⁶ During 2020, the 'sociocultural practice of denying women the right to own land, especially through inheritance, was prevalent in most regions.'⁷

Gender-based violence is widespread⁸, and the prevalence is high throughout the country⁹, including frequent sexual harassment of unaccompanied women traveling alone.¹⁰ Perpetrators are rarely prosecuted¹¹, partially due to victims' reluctance to report for fear of reprisal or stigmatisation.¹²

Forced marriage is a widespread practice in Cameroon. In 2020, a district level official described the practice as 'rampant' all over the country, but more concerning in mainly Muslim communities in the West regions. According to Cameroonian authorities, as reported by Voice of America (VOA), 6 out of 10 girls are forced to marry before reaching 16 years of age in these communities, and in Cameroon as whole nearly one third of girls were married off before reaching 18 years of age.¹³ The practice of forcibly marrying widows to one of their deceased husband's relatives continued to some extent, as a way to secure property left by the husband, including the marital home.¹⁴ In July 2020, 300 single mothers in western Cameroon took to the streets to protest against the practice of forced marriage. According to one protest leader, most protesters had been married to unknown men at 14 years of age, and some decided to leave their homes with their babies after their husbands brought home other wives'.¹⁵ Polygamy in Cameroon is legal and deeply rooted in tradition.¹⁶ According to a survey

² The official text in French of the Cameroun: Constitution, 30 January 1996, as published by the Secrétariat Général de la Présidence de la République in 1996 is available at [url](#)

³ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2021 – Cameroon, 3 March 2021, [url](#); USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#) p. 40

⁴ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 40

⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2021 – Cameroon, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

⁶ UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), p. 13

⁷ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 40

⁸ UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), p. 13

⁹ OECD, Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) Cameroon, 2019, [url](#), p. 4; UN Women, Global Database on Violence against Women – Cameroon, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁰ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 29

¹¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2021 – Cameroon, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

¹² USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 39

¹³ VOA, Cameroon Single Mothers Protest Forced, Early Marriages, 9 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁵ VOA, Cameroon Single Mothers Protest Forced, Early Marriages, 9 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶ OECD, Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) Cameroon, 2019, [url](#), p. 2

conducted by the Institut Supérieur du Sahel at the University of Maroua (Cameroon), in partnership with the Association to Combat Violence against Women-Extreme North (ALVF-EN), in Cameroon, 'marriage is seen as a girl's life purpose' and 'a young single woman is perceived negatively, thought to be infertile and even sometimes considered to be a prostitute or a witch'.¹⁷

Cameroon experiences a humanitarian crisis due to continuous violence in Lake Chad Basin, and in the North-West and South-West regions causing displacement, as well as high refugee influxes from the Central African Republic (CAR).¹⁸ UNOCHA estimates that 39 % of the national population lives below the poverty line, and estimates that the same figure for women raises to 51.5 %.¹⁹ The crisis in the North-West and South-West of the country, as noted by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), widowed 30 % of women in the area since its beginning. Women without male support who live in displacement are vulnerable as they may be exposed to sexual violence by members of armed groups, host communities, and relatives.²⁰ Additionally, Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap) reported that 'girls, as well as women who became heads of family because of the enlistment or death of their husbands, sometimes use survival sex to provide for their families'.²¹ Widow mothers can also 'find themselves cut off from family' as they are considered non-members of their birth family nor the family they married into, according to an article by NGO SOS Children's Villages.²² A 2021 research study conducted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), with a focus in South-West region, showed that female headed households are the second most common vulnerable group in the community.²³

For more information on the security situation in the Anglophone regions and its impact on the civilian population, including on women, it is possible to consult the [EASO COI Query response, Latest developments on security situation in Anglophone region between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2021, 14 June 2021](#).

For more information on Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Cameroon, it is possible to consult the [EASO COI Query Response, Cameroon, Sexual and gender-based violence \(SGBV\), 5 June 2019](#).

¹⁷ ALVF-EN, Institut Supérieur du Sahel at the University of Maroua, International Women's Health Coalition, Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Cameroon: Research Findings, n.d., [url](#), p. 2

¹⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Cameroon, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 9, 22

¹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Cameroon, March 2021, [url](#), p. 62

²⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, Cameroon, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 56–57

²¹ GenCap, Data on Gender Equality in Cameroon, 17 October 2019, [url](#), p. 7

²² SOS Children's Villages, Struggling but enduring, a story of single parenthood in Cameroon, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

²³ DRC, Focus Group Discussion report: Child Protection Needs in South-West Cameroon, 8 February 2021, [url](#), p.

2. Overview of the socio-economic situation in Yaoundé and Douala

Yaoundé is the capital of Cameroon, with an estimated population of 4 164 million people.²⁴ It is situated in the south-central part of the country²⁵ and considered its political capital. Douala is situated in the Littoral region and considered Cameroon's economic hub²⁶, with an estimated 3 663 million inhabitants.²⁷

Both Yaoundé and Douala have been affected by the significant displacement in the Anglophone regions of the country, resulting in strained host communities and service delivery capacities.²⁸ Moreover, Cameroon was heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, from both a health and economic perspective.²⁹

Urbanisation in Cameroon continues to be 'rapid and uncontrolled'. The urbanisation rate in 2020 was around 53.2 %. Most of the working-age population in the country is self-employed, and 90 % of the labour market is informal. The primary sector is mainly represented by agriculture, which employs 62 % of the working population. Within agriculture, 80 % of workers are women.³⁰

Although there has been some economic progress, poverty is still a significant problem in Cameroon, with high poverty rates concentrated in the Far-North, North, North-West and Adamawa regions.³¹ In urban areas, there was a considerable drop in poverty, from 12.2 % in 2007 to 8.9 % in 2014. However, there was an increase in inequalities during this period, especially in the distribution of wealth.³² An estimated 10 % of households living in urban areas, such as Yaoundé and Douala, are estimated to be vulnerable to food insecurity.³³

²⁴ CIA, The world factbook, Cameroon, last updated 12 January 2022, [url](#)

²⁵ Britannica, Yaoundé, 25 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁶ Cameroon, RoC – Presidency of the Republic, Presentation of Cameroon, n.d., [url](#)

²⁷ CIA, The world factbook, Cameroon, last updated 12 January 2022, [url](#)

²⁸ World Bank, The Socio-Political Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon: Assessing the Economic and Social Impacts, 21 June 2021, [url](#), p. 1

²⁹ African development bank group, African Economic Outlook, From Debt Resolution to Growth: The Road Ahead for Africa, 12 March 2021, [url](#), p. 107

³⁰ UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), p. 12

³¹ UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), pp. 12, 23

³² UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), p. 12, 15

³³ UNSDG, United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Assistance Framework for Cameroon 2022-2026, 22 November 2021, [url](#), p. 13

3. Single women without male support in in Yaoundé and Douala

Scarce information could be found regarding the situation of single women without male support in Yaoundé and Douala within the time constraint for researching and drafting this COI query response.

Interviewed in 2012 by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), two local NGOs³⁴ stated that in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala, it is possible for single woman to live alone, as long as they have the necessary resources, noting also that their type of employment depends on their level of education. One of the sources further noted that some landlords may ask for the marital status of the potential tenants. One of the NGOs interviewed by IRB also stated that women who live alone may have ‘poor reputation’, since - according to tradition - women must live with their parents until they get married. Therefore, the source added, members of their family might need to act as guarantors for single women to be able to access accommodation.³⁵

Local sources reported that prostitution was on the rise in both Douala³⁶ and Yaoundé.³⁷ Some IDP women have also resorted to prostitution in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala³⁸, due to the inability to access resources. Many women displaced from the Anglophone regions have lost close and/or extended family members, remaining without any financial and emotional support. For these women, turning to prostitution has been a coping mechanism to provide for themselves and for eventual dependants. Women turning to prostitution are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence as well as sexually transmitted diseases.³⁹

Citing a source within the Yaoundé police, the local media outlet Cameroon Intelligence Report, stated that there are ‘tens of thousands of underage girls’, including students and displaced teenagers from Southern Cameroon, working as prostitutes in the capital city, especially in the districts of Mini Ferme and Obili, close to university campus.⁴⁰

According to an article by New Frame, a not-for-profit social justice media project⁴¹, sex workers in Yaoundé are abused by and required to pay bribes to police officers. The source stated that, during routine patrol in the TKC neighbourhood of Yaoundé, where low-income sex workers live and work, police and gendarmerie officers intimidate women into paying

³⁴ Child Care Cameroon, [url](#); Femmes ALVF, [url](#)

³⁵ Canada, IRB, Cameroon: Forced marriages; treatment of and protection available to women who try to flee a forced marriage; whether it is possible for a woman to live alone in the country’s large cities such as Yaoundé and Douala [CMR104129.FE], 20 September 2012, [url](#)

³⁶ AfrikMag, Cameroun: La prostitution dans la ville de Douala, un « métier » en pleine expansion (Cameroon: prostitution in the city of Douala, a booming ‘profession’ – Informal translation), 3 January 2017, [url](#)

³⁷ Cameroon Intelligence Report, Forced into prostitution in Yaoundé: the nightmare of trying to survive in a divided Cameroon, 3 November 2020, [url](#)

³⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2021 – Cameroon, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

³⁹ PC (USA), Presbyterian Mission, Anglophone Crisis Pushes Young Girls into Prostitution for Survival, 9 December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Cameroon Intelligence Report, Forced into prostitution in Yaoundé: the nightmare of trying to survive in a divided Cameroon, 3 November 2020, [url](#)

⁴¹ New Frame, About, n.d., [url](#)

bribes. Such abuse is often not reported for fear of being charged with ‘prostitution’, which is a crime according to the Cameroonian penal code.⁴²

In a 2014 report, the World Bank estimated that, in Cameroon, between 61 % and 80 % of women with no education lack sexual autonomy, compared with less than 20 % of women with higher education.⁴³

For more information on women victims of trafficking in Cameroon, it is possible to consult the [EASO COI Query Response, Cameroon, Trafficking in Human Beings \(THB\), 16 November 2021](#).

For more information on the situation of persons living with HIV/AIDS, including women, it is possible to consult the [EASO COI Query response Treatment of people with HIV/AIDS, 11 May 2021](#).

For more information on the situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees in Yaoundé and Douala, including IDPs and refugee women, it is possible to consult the [EASO COI Query Response, Cameroon, Internally displaced persons \(IDPs\) and returnees in Douala and Yaoundé, 24 August 2021](#).

⁴² New Frame, Cameroon’s sex workers seek a digital solution, 26 October 2021, [url](#)

⁴³ World Bank, Voice and agency: Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity, 2014, [url](#), p. 15

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