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Cameroon: Situation and treatment of single women and women who head their own households, including their ability to live on their own and access housing, income, education, health care, and support services, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé; impact of COVID-19 (2020–May 2022) [CMR201034.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

In a 2018 article on gender and household headship in Cameroon's Northwest Region, published in *Health Policy and Planning*, a peer-reviewed journal (Oxford University Press n.d.), Tessa Oraro et al. found in a survey of 550 households between April and May 2016 in the Bui and Donga-Mantung divisions that households headed by women were "typically smaller" and "more likely" to live in rural areas (Oraro, et al. 13 Nov. 2017, 165, 166).

1.1 Statistics

According to the 2018 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS) [1], 26.0 percent of Cameroonian households were headed by women, 23.4 percent in rural areas and 28.1 percent in urban areas (NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 42). The same source provides the following statistics on the percentage of women between 15 and 49 years old who reported having experienced physical or sexual violence:

[translation]

	Since age 15	[translation] "Sometimes" or "[o]ften" in the previous 12 months
Single	30.3%	12.8%
In union	41.9%	21.1%
In union breakdown (e.g., through widowhood, divorce, or separation)	55.1%	23.9%

Percentage of women between the ages of 15 and 49 who have experienced physical violence

(NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 327, 402)

[translation]

	Since age 15	In the previous 12 months
Single	9.9%	1.6%
In union	13.6%	7.2%
In union breakdown	21.8%	7.4%

Percentage of women between the ages of 15 and 49 who have experienced sexual violence

(NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 404)

The same source also indicates that, among single women who experienced physical or sexual violence, 28.8 percent sought help to end the violence compared to 48.1 percent of women in union breakdown and 35.4 percent of women in union (NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 419).

1.2 Treatment by Society

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Rural Women Center for Education and Development Cameroon (RuWCED), an NGO based in Ndop in Cameroon's North West Region (RuWCED n.d.a) which promotes the rights of women and children living in rural areas and their access to education and resources (RuWCED n.d.b), stated that, for women, single status is for the most part "culturally and socially humiliating," especially for teenage mothers or unmarried heads of household with children (RuWCED 25 May 2022). The same source noted that single women are "usually stereotyped" as having a "bad character" or some "problem" that "prevent[s]" them from getting married, since marriage is "highly esteemed" in Cameroonian culture (RuWCED 25 May 2022). An article published by a Cameroonian correspondent on YourCommonwealth, a website created by the Commonwealth Youth Programme as "a platform for the voices of young people from Commonwealth countries" and edited by "experienced journalists" (Commonwealth Youth Programme n.d.), also states that "many" single women, "especially those in their late 20s to 30s," experience "immense stigma" and are "regular[ly]" asked why they are not married or where their husband is (Feukeng 19 Jan. 2022).

For further information on the situation of women in Cameroon, particularly concerning domestic violence, see Response to Information Request CMR201035 of June 2022.

2. Ability to Relocate

Information on the ability of single women and women who head their own households to relocate elsewhere in Cameroon, particularly to Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the RuWCED:

"[S]ingle women and women heads of household usually seek help from friends and acquaintances who are already settled in the big cities" when relocating. One of the "main" challenges is finding a place to stay while house- and job-hunting. Some have reported sleeping on the streets, since they did not know anyone in the city with room to host them. Relocating is "easier" when the woman has connections with someone in their employment field (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

3. Access to Housing and Property

Information on access to housing and property for single women and women who head their own households, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the RuWCED in response to a question about access to housing for single women and women heads of household:

"[G]enerally," single women find it "more difficult" to obtain "adequate" housing. Landlords "tend to doubt their ability to pay the rent consistently," since men "often" have better jobs and higher salaries than women. When renting to a prospective tenant whose ability to pay rent is in doubt, such as single women and women heads of household, "most" property owners will require up to six months' rent upfront. Furthermore, landlords "sometimes" ask about women's livelihoods in order to avoid renting to women who are involved in sex work (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

4. Access to Employment and Income

Information on access to employment and income for single women and women who head their own households in Cameroon was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to an International Labour Organization (ILO) report on the impact of COVID-19 on employment, informal sector workers, which account for more than 90 percent of those employed, are "mainly women" and are "most directly affected" by decreases in income caused by the pandemic (UN Dec. 2020, 1). According to the RuWCED, "[s]ingle women and household heads are very vulnerable," since "access to capital assets is very complicated" for them (RuWCED 25 May 2022). The 2018 CDHS provides the following statistics on employment for women between the ages of 15 and 49 according to marital status:

[translation]

Marital status	Worked in the 12 months before the survey	Did not work in the 12 months before the survey	
Currently working	Not currently working		
Single	43.7%	5.4%	50.8%
In union	82.0%	4.1%	13.9%
breakdown			

Marital status	Worked in the 12 months before the survey	Did not work in the 12 months before the survey
Currently working	Not currently working	
In union	69.8%	4.0% 26.2%

Women's Access to Employment by Marital Status

(NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 70)

[translation]

	Executive/directorial/managerial role	Administrative work	Direct service provision to individuals, businesses and vendors	Skilled manual labour	Unskilled manual labour	Farming and agricultural labour
Single	0.5%	3.5%	50.5%	6.6%	4.7%	34.3%
In union breakdown	0.4%	1.7%	51.2%	5.6%	2.5%	38.5%
In union	0.3%	1.7%	40.5%	7.2%	2.4%	47.9%

Women's Occupation Type by Marital Status

(NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 72)

4.1 Situation in Douala and Yaoundé

The information in this section was provided by the RuWCED regarding employment for single women and women heads of household who relocate to large French-speaking cities, including Douala and Yaoundé:

For informal and unskilled employment, women "mostly" do not need to speak French. However, these jobs pay "meagre salaries" that are "usually" not enough to support the household. Additionally, employees in these sectors are not paid "regularly," potentially waiting "many months" for payment.

Without a "relevant" social network and knowledge of French, women can have difficulty accessing "white collar" or formal employment; the more "formal" the job, the more necessary a command of French. It is "easier" to find work if the woman knows someone in her field of employment. Women with previous employment experience have a "relatively easier" time finding jobs, notably in fields such as teaching, for which they can more "easi[ly]" find jobs, because of the "proliferation" of English-language schools catering to displaced Anglophones. Additionally, those who were previously self-employed (as hairdressers, tailors, *petit* (small) traders, make-up artists, etc.) can more easily start a new business in the city, since they need "little" start-up capital and already have the tools required. However, women business owners in the informal sector will "struggle" if they do not speak French, since their customer base is "largely" Francophone (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

5. Access to Education

Information on access to education for single women and women who head their own households in Cameroon, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

ACAPS, an "independent information provider" that specializes in "humanitarian needs analysis and assessment" in crisis situations (ACAPS n.d.), citing NGO, media and other sources, indicates that in 2017 "separatist armed groups" in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon [2] "imposed a boycott" on government-curriculum education and that "most" schools in that area remained closed as of February 2021 (ACAPS 19 Feb. 2021, 1).

Regarding access to services in Douala and Yaoundé, including education, the RuWCED stated that "all" public services are "fairly accessible," though users have to pay to access them (RuWCED 25 May 2022). The same source noted a "proliferation" of Anglophone schools providing education to internally displaced English-speakers (RuWCED 25 May 2022). The source added with regard to vocational training that in some cases, family members might be able to help women access such training and a "few" NGOs offer free training for internally displaced women (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

6. Access to Health Care

Information on access to health care for single women and women who head their own households in Cameroon, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The 2018 CDHS provides the following statistics on the percentage of women between 15 and 49 years old who reported [translation] "significant problems" accessing health care:

	Obtaining permission seek care	Obtaining to money for care	Distance to the institution for health	Does not want to go there alone	At least one issue accessing health care
Single	34.2%	62.1%	34.4%	29.8%	68.2%
In union breakdown	33.2%	74.9%	43.3%	25.7%	78.2%
In union	35.1%	69.3%	42.4%	27.3%	74.0%

Problems Experienced by Women in Accessing Health Care, by Marital Status

(NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 193)

Regarding Yaoundé and Douala, the RuWCED stated that public services, including health care, are "fairly accessible," though all public services are "pay as you go" (RuWCED 25 May 2022). The same source added that health care facilities vary in cost and that it requires "experience" to know which are most affordable (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

7. Access to Support Services

Information on access to support services for single women and women who head their own households in Cameroon, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The RuWCED noted that single women and women heads of household have "no [government] support" when relocating to Douala and Yaoundé; instead, these women rely more on NGOs and family and community networks for assistance (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

8. Impact of COVID-19

Information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on single women and women who head their own households, particularly in Douala and Yaoundé, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In a press release by Plan International, an organization promoting children's rights and gender equality (Plan International n.d.), on its research into the impacts of conflict and COVID19 on girls in Cameroon, the source noted that COVID-19 has "exacerbated" existing conflict and poverty in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon and that 90 percent of research participants [3] cited a lack of income as a "push factor for sexual exploitation," such as early and forced marriage (Plan International 24 Mar. 2021). The same source quotes their Country Director in Cameroon as stating that "'the added pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic [is] making an already dangerous situation [in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon] worse'" and that "'adolescent girls and young women are being the hardest hit'" (Plan International 24 Mar. 2021). The ILO report notes that "[w]omen are relatively more represented in micro-enterprises and thus more exposed to economic risks linked to the strict application of confinement measures" (UN Dec. 2020, 7).

The information in the following paragraph was provided by the RuWCED regarding the situation in Douala and Yaoundé:

Both practically and emotionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has "negatively" impacted single women and women who lead their own households. Women report being afraid for what will happen if they contract COVID-19, since they are "sole provider[s]" in their families. Petit traders chose to travel less frequently to the local markets where they normally purchase bulk food to sell in the city; this resulted in reduced income and, "in some cases," bankruptcy. "Many" lost their jobs, "especially" those working in private education. School shutdowns also created additional childcare and homeschooling responsibilities, further increasing stress on women who head their own households (RuWCED 25 May 2022).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The 2018 Cameroon Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS) was conducted from 16 June 2018 to 19 January 2019 by Cameroon's National Institute of Statistics (NIS) and Ministry of Public Health; ICF, an international organization that offers "advisory and digital services" to business and government clients and coordinates the "largest global health survey" (ICF n.d.), provided technical assistance (NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 2). The CDHS was part of the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) program, a project funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) which involves [translation] "providing support and technical assistance in countries worldwide for the implementation of surveys on population and health" (NIS of Cameroon and ICF Feb. 2020, 2).

[2] Plan International states that

[t]he North West and South West regions of Cameroon have been engulfed in crisis since late 2016. Starting as a low-scale insurgency, within a year the conflict had spread across the two regions with separatists claiming the area should form an independent state called "Ambazonia." Confrontations between Government Defence Forces and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) have led to frequent roadblocks, ... the indiscriminate killing of civilians, and the looting and destruction of property, perpetuated allegedly by both the state military and NSAGs. (Plan International 23 Mar. 2021, 3)

[3] Using focus groups and other participatory tools, Plan International surveyed more than 400 adolescents in nine divisions of the Northwest and Southwest regions, 299 parents and caregivers, and 79 humanitarian workers in the region (Plan International 23 Mar. 2021, 6).

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United Nations (UN). December 2020. International Labour Organization (ILO). [Cameroon - Rapid Evaluation of the Impact of COVID-19 on Employment and the Labour Market in Cameroon](#). [Accessed 30 May 2022]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: African Women's Association; associate professor of gender studies at a Cameroonian university; Association camerounaise des femmes juristes; Association de lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes; Association pour la prévention des violences conjugales et familiales; CARE International; Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa; Child Care Cameroon; International Federation of Women Lawyers Cameroon; Reach Out Cameroon; UN – UNDP.

Internet sites, including: The Advocates for Human Rights; Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Associated Press; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; *Cameroon tribune*; CARE International; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; ecoi.net; Factiva; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Freedom House; *The Guardian*; Human Rights Watch; Minority Rights Group International; Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; The New Humanitarian; Norway – Landinfo; Norwegian Refugee Council; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; Radio France internationale; Sweden – Swedish Migration Agency; Transparency International Cameroon; UK – Home Office; UN – Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Refworld, UNDP; US – Department of State, Library of Congress; Voice of America; The Organization for World Peace.

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