



ISSUES OF DISCRIMINATION IN WIDOWHOOD IN CAMEROON

THAT REQUIRE ADDRESSING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CEDAW

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WPD hopes that this report will assist the Committee in its examination of the Government of Cameroon's report on its implementation and compliance with the articles of the Convention.

As in many developing countries, especially those in conflict and post conflict situations, the status of their widows – and wives of those forcibly disappeared or missing – is often ignored. Yet it is widows and their children, particularly their daughters, who so often suffer the most discrimination and violence, direct and indirect, from state and non-state actors, and this discrimination, resulting in extreme poverty, marginalisation, and exposure to violence, requires visibility so that it can be addressed by governments.

In the Cameroon, according to the research of CAFENEC and of FIDA (International Federation of Women Lawyers Cameroon) in spite of several modern laws on the Statute Book that purport to

protect widows from deprivation of their rights, and criminalise acts of violence against them, the Government has done nothing to implement or monitor these laws. Cameroon is a bijural nation, and customs and traditions, especially in the rural areas, take precedence over modern legislation.

For example, laws such as Article (1)(2) on human rights and democratic principles, the criminalisation, with imprisonment of 10 years on “levirate marriage”, and Section 77 (2) of the Civil status Regulation Ordinance of 1981 on paper should prohibit treating widows like chattels, forcing them to be married, mostly polygamously, to a husband’s brother, chasing them off their land and homestead, stealing their property, and coercing them into degrading and harmful practices.

Moreover, the Government has inadequately addressed this situation in its current report to the CEDAW Committee. WPD hopes that this brief submission will assist the Committee in its consideration of Cameroon’s State Report during its 57th^h Session.

1. There are an estimated 500,000 widows in Cameroon, out of a population of about 20.550.000, accommodating some 250 different ethnic groups, but exact data is not available.¹ With an increase in the number of people dying due to HIV, there is a corresponding increase in the number of young, child widows.² For example, myths relating to the prevention or cure in the context of HIV and AIDS has led to an increase in the marriage of girl children to older men, resulting in child widowhood. Many mothers, and older women (grandmothers) are widowed via the AIDS virus

→The Government should be required to take all available means, including working with women’s and widows’ NGOs, to fill this gap in **statistics**, providing official and reliable data to be used as a basis to design and implement effective policies. Also to reveal, through focused research and interviews, documenting their experiences of violence and abuse, the needs and diverse economic and caring roles of widows, their support systems, coping survival strategies and the barriers to them accessing justice through the modern laws.

2. The stigma attached to widows in Cameroon is the fruit of a patriarchal society and culture, which gives more power to men than to women.³ Their treatment is discriminatory,

¹www.globalpressjournal.com/africa/cameroon/cameroon-takes-strides-empower-widows-eliminate-traditional-rituals

² themediaproject.org/article/widowhood-rituals-behind-reporting

³ Lydienne Nkaleu, Présidente Nationale Comité d'Assistance à la Femme Nécessiteuse du Cameroun (CAFENEC)

under Article 1, since widowers are not subject to such traditions and customs. Especially but not only in rural areas, (city dwellers retain close links with the village) widows are denied their fundamental human rights. Traditional widowhood rites are a widespread phenomenon in Cameroon. They vary greatly according to religions, ethnicities and tribe affiliation, but as a common feature they include degrading, humiliating, discriminating and inhumane practices.⁴ Among them: 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 forced to sleep on the floor, being publicly unclothed, being segregated, being forced to beg for food. Cases are reported⁵ of widows who are not allowed to leave their houses; who are not able to go to work; who have problems inheriting their husbands' properties. In fact, as wives are traditionally considered their husbands' properties, widows become their husbands' families' properties. They often have to choose between marry one of their husbands' relatives or being left homeless and destitute, unable to support themselves and their children. Being many marriages traditional ones, without a marriage certificate, no legal recourses are possible.

→ The Government should be asked to explain the measures (legal and practical) undertaken so far to **put an end to discriminatory widowhood rites**, to increase widows' knowledge of their rights and to empower and support widows who assert their rights. This should be done in synergy with traditional chiefs. The extreme restrictions on widows' mobility and life-styles breaches all Articles of the Convention.

→ The Government should be asked to clarify what its efforts are, in conformity with Article 5 of the CEDAW, to **prevent widows from being victim of stereotypes and social pressures that impede the full enjoyment of their rights and freedoms. What measures have been taken to modify social and cultural patterns of conduct that so vilify widows, and cause them such suffering.**

→ The Government should in particular be asked to explain the measures undertaken so far to ensure widows can enjoy their **right to work** (Article 11 of CEDAW), **to property** (Article 15 of CEDAW), **to freely choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent** (Article 16 of CEDAW).

⁴ www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gallery/2013/jul/01/camerouns-widows-rebuilding-lives-in-pictures ; www.rnw.nl/africa/article/plight-widows-cameroon

⁵ www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gallery/2013/jul/01/cameroon-widows-rebuilding-lives-in-pictures

3. Cases are reported of widows who face disproportionate bureaucratic difficulties in addressing officials to receive assistance, due to the lack of a man who talk for them and lack of implementation of specific policies.⁶

→ The Government should be asked to specify if and how it implements Article 1 of the CEDAW and ensures that its officials are trained to **implement assistance policies without discriminating against widows**.

→ The Government should be asked to explain its strategies to improve the rapidity and accessibility – so far insufficient - of the measures to support widows and their children in all the fields covered by Part III of the CEDAW.

4. Being deprived of any other resource, widows and their children often get involved in illicit activities, prostitution, child labour, crime or vandalism as coping strategies.⁷

→ According to Article 6 of the CEDAW, the Government should be held responsible to undertake all efforts possible in order to **impede that widow's coping strategies lead them and their families towards illegality, exploitation, marginalization and extreme poverty**; both material and psychological support strategies are to be taken into account.

We conclude with following example, provided by CAFENEC, whose additional report we also attach with this submission.

Hajaratou Chanteh's eyes are wet and her voice is trembling as she talks about her fight with her late husband's family. Following his death 16 years ago, they took all his possessions and denied her access to the house they had shared with their children. Since then, she has been trying to claim her rightful inheritance, while raising their children with the meagre income she earns from tilling other people's land. "They told me to hand over the little money I earned or borrowed – money I should have used to look after my children and me," Chanteh says. "They said it was 'family property'. My father was frail by then. I had no helper."

⁶ www.trust.org/item/20111021105200-d9v4u?view=print

⁷ www.globalgiving.org/projects/pig-rearing-project-for-widows-in-cameroon/

WPD thanks the Committee for inviting it to submit this report. Please contact us if you require any further information.

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