

# NATIONAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON PREVENTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE THROUGH ARMS CONTROL

# CAMEROON

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## GENDER AND ARMED VIOLENCE: A LOOK AT THE SITUATION IN CAMEROON

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Small arms and light weapons (SALW) are the most accessible, easily concealable, and transportable type of weapons in Cameroon. They play a central role in the current violence there, even while the government, through its partnerships, authorises transfers of other categories of weapons that are also within the scope of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), such as aircraft, tanks, and ships.

Since 2016, the uprisings in English-speaking areas in Cameroon have gradually led to fighting between fighters demanding secession, and national armed forces. The weapons used by the fighters are difficult to trace and debate exists on their source. Some are produced locally and in contravention of national law; others may have been obtained from legal stocks. There is currently a heightened risk of diversion. SALW and other weapons are used to commit serious acts of gender-based violence (GBV).

WILPF Cameroon examined the current conflict to understand how the presence of weapons is making it easier to commit gender-based violence. To do this, a WILPF Cameroon member living in Bamenda (North West region), collected testimony and examples, described below.

- A young woman was shopping near a service station in March 2019, on a day declared as a "ghost town". This expression refers to a day in which no activity is permitted, and personal movement is restricted. Within the English-speaking regions, these are declared by the fighters and not the central government. The

young woman was mother to a baby that she is still breast-feeding. A police officer intercepted and attempted to rape her. She begged him to stop, explaining that in her culture it is forbidden for a woman who is breastfeeding to have sex with a man other than her husband. She tried to resist, at which point the police officer shot her with his pistol.

- Women are being discouraged to not attend school because of attacks by secessionist fighters. In March 2019, two girls decided to attend classes and were attacked by men armed with rifles. While it would have been possible for bystanders to intervene, it was said that because the fighters were armed, the bystanders were unable to rescue the girls. Such kidnappings are occurring on a daily basis and target women. This constitutes a form of social gender-based violence and potentially economic, as lack of access to education will hinder employment opportunities.
- Armed violence is leading to economic gender-based violence in other ways. In the region examined, it is estimated that more than 80 per cent of women are unable to perform the agricultural activities that they typically carry out, impacting livelihoods and national productivity. During a Parliament session in 2018, a parliamentarian from the North West region called the government's attention to the risk of famine in the region because of the extent to which violence has impacted farming. There are two aspects of



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this: first, the increased armed violence causes women to flee. At the same time, women are being forbidden from carrying out their work by the fighters. Those who do so anyway are often killed.

## The presence of weapons can have diverse gendered impacts that go beyond immediate use of a weapon in an act of physical or sexual violence.

- Men are not left behind and also suffer violence based on their gender or in relation to the societal roles they play that extend from being male. They do not necessarily take up weapons and become fighters in the conflict, but rather many men have been forced to abandon income-generating or other activities to watch over their families. Generally, this is meant to create security and confidence within the family by their presence and not by being armed, but in a few instances men are acquiring weapons for family protection. Whether armed or not, men are being murdered for acting to protect their families. It is reported that SALW are making it easier to kill several men in a short period of time.
- In May 2019, three women were punished by heavily armed secessionist forces for allegedly disobeying a “ghost” Labour Day that had been declared by the fighters. The women were arrested by armed men and molested before promising to not disobey again. This incident was filmed and shared on social networks.

As of May 2019, the crisis in Cameroon has already left 1,850 people dead and 530,000 internally displaced while tens of thousands of people have become refugees in only 20 months, according to a report published by the non-governmental

organisation International Crisis Group (ICG).<sup>1</sup> The report highlights that the intransigent warring may generate more violence and prolong the conflict, no camp does not seem able to win militarily in the short term. The international arms trade finds fertile ground there and will continue to impose armed violence on the populations in which 75 per cent of those impacted are female.

The above examples demonstrate the multi-faceted ways in which the presence of weapons can have diverse gendered impacts that go beyond immediate use of a weapon in an act of physical or sexual violence. There are socio-economic ramifications of armed violence and conflict, in which existing gender norms and societal roles are exacerbated and create vulnerability among both women and men. States parties to the ATT must employ a more holistic understanding of gender-based violence when assessing the potential impact of an arms transfer and consider how weapons can be used to facilitate GBV in all its forms.

1. International Crisis Group, “Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?” – Crisis Group Africa Report N°272, 2 May 2019, available <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/272-crise-anglophone-au-cameroun-comment-arriver-aux-pourparlers>.