

What the Cameroonian woman Needs

Current limitations and the future of the female population in rural Cameroon

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Cameroon, officially called the Republic of Cameroon, is located on the West Coast of Africa. It borders Nigeria, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Gulf of Guinea. Its coastline stretches from Rio-del-Rey in Nigeria, down to Equatorial Guinea. Cameroon is divided into 10 provinces and subdivided into 50 divisions (called départements in French). The capital city is Yaoundé, however, Douala, the former capital and largest city, is referred to as its economic capital.

On January 1, 1960, the former French Cameroun, the colony, became the independent Republic of Cameroon. In October, 1961, Cameroon merged with the southern part of British Cameroons to form the French Republic of Cameroon. Cameroon covers over 183,500 square miles or 475,440 square kilometers. Its population, as of July 2005, totaled over 16 million people with a population density of 88 per square mile.

For many years the Republic of Cameroon and its people were a German



colony under the oppressive slavery yoke of the Germans. When Germany lost World War II, the Republic and its people were divided and placed in trust (as war spoils) by the League of

Nations, in other words, the Republic was split among the French and British. As a result, Cameroonians were placed under the oppressive slavery yoke of the French and



British nations. Throughout all of these oppressions, the Cameroonian Rural Woman faced Socio- cultural, political, economic and traditional inequalities. . She experienced gender bias and violations of human rights. These violations are still evident today.

THE TYPICAL CAMEROONIAN WOMAN

With an estimated population of over 16.5 million inhabitants, women comprise about 51% of the population. Rural women make up about 65% of the total female population. This, therefore, implies that the rural woman is the typical Cameroonian woman because she makes up the largest percentage of the female population. From these statistics, it could be said that a typical Cameroonian rural woman is a true representation of the African woman. Therefore, the woman I will discuss here is the CAMEROONIAN RURAL WOMAN. The Cameroonian Rural Woman is

very hardworking. She works from daybreak to day daw, that is, around the clock. She's got energy and intelligence just like her male counterpart. Her abilities and qualities have to be put into proper use. In a rural setting, life takes a very interesting twist: more manpower is spent working on the farm. However, there are many forms of distractions including consumption of alcoholic drinks (mostly by men), narration of folk tales, moonlight dancing, communal gatherings, and sex. There are no good roads, electricity, Internet, television, telephone and pipe-borne water. As a result, the Cameroonians have conditioned their lives to suit their environment.

Overall, the needs of the Cameroonian Rural Woman is not in opposition to those of the Cameroonian Man. In fact, her needs complement that of the Cameroonian

Man. However, to bring this to full fruition, she must have the empowerment to remove the gender biases and human rights violations that exist.



GENDER BIASES

The Cameroonian Rural Woman has always been marginalized in all aspects of life. She gets up very early (around 4:00 a.m.) each day while the man is still in bed to begin her day. She prepares food for the entire family which involves using fuel wood, splitting the wood with an axe, cleaning the food, thrashing, peeling and, finally, cooking the food.

After serving it, she goes to a stream to fetch water to clean herself, her children and their clothes. This effort entails a one-hour trek to the stream. The woman, however, enjoys this particular activity very much because it is a unique occasion for her to communicate with other women. She uses this opportunity to discuss her troubles and receive advice

from the other women. Afterwards, she prepares herself to go to the farm. It takes her another hour, at a minimum, of continuous trekking to arrive back at the farm. On another

note, the Cameroonian Rural Woman makes up the largest percentage of illiteracy and has the lowest rate of school attendance. She is often pressured into an early arranged marriage. She may be taken out of school by her parents. She lacks the right to own land, but is the driving force behind agricultural development. She cultivates crops, harvests, and sells them just to hand over the proceeds to her husband, who uses the money to buy alcoholic drinks. It is a taboo for a woman to try to know or question her husband about how he used the money, in spite of the fact, that she is solely responsible for generating it.

Further, she can not file for a divorce, but the man has the right to divorce her, his wife, if he deems it necessary. It is also worth noting that the Cameroonian Rural Woman suffers female genital mutilation and lacks the right to make decisions about reproduction. The man has the sole right to ask for sex from his wife at any time, even if she is not prepared for it. He decides on the number of children

they will have and how to bring forth these children. Male infidelity is no problem but it is a taboo for the woman. If she engages in this action, she is severely punished. In a village setting, she has no say in decision making. She must comply with all final decisions made by the man, these actions are backed by the tradition and culture.

Governmental policies, traditions and culture have all been used as major tools to enslave the Rural Woman and to violate her human rights in Cameroon. For example, if a man gets married to his wife and he dies, his younger brother can take over the same wife even if he is married. This type of arrangement goes on and on for generations. It should be noted that this type of arrangement is a direct tool for the rapid increase in the transmission of sexually related diseases. Politically, women make up 65% of Cameroon's

population; however, they hold the least number of government positions. For example, there are 65 Ministers of the Federal Government yet only 3 Ministers are lead by women. In the 6 state universities, only one woman holds an administrative position at the university level. In the 10 provinces, not one of the governors is a woman.

NEEDS OF THE CAMEROONIAN WOMAN

The Cameroonian Rural Woman needs empowerment, the same as all women worldwide. She needs to be vested with the legal power to assist in eliminating and eradicating gender bias and violations of human rights against her and her children. Also, she needs to be economically empowered through the CIG(Common Initiative Groups) or NGO'S (Non-Governmental Organizations) to assist in the complete eradication of poverty.

Further, she needs income-generating and entrepreneurial activities aimed at encouraging her to diversify her 'routine businesses'(a tool for child bearing, taking care of the house, children and her husband, etc.) typical of a traditional African setting, into more lucrative activities like participating in the decision making, especially those issues that concern her directly, and be fully involved in the developmental process of her political, social and economic community.

Education, especially in the adult literacy sector should be re-enforced for the woman. Sensitization programs should be organized at different levels to properly enlighten the traditional men, women, children, and government authorities about basic human rights. She needs to know that she has a right to get an education. For example, a girl is dismissed from school if she is found pregnant, but the guy who got her pregnant is allowed to continue his education. Also, most men are voted into high post responsibilities by rural women because of ignorance. She will prefer to vote a man into office rather than a woman folk because she thinks that only a man can run such a position successfully, even if both have the same qualifications.

The Cameroonian woman needs to be empowered politically through seminars. She makes up the mass of the political force, most of the votes are in their hands, she can make good use of this advantage by voting for the candidate who will best represent and protect her rights, and work for her interest and the growth of her community.

The duties of each member of the community need to be redefined in order to put an end to the limitations of rights that favor the man and enslave the woman. It is, therefore, crucial for the Cameroonian authorities to redefine the status of the woman and, more importantly, put into force a system of gender

partnership while allowing the woman to take a more active part in the developmental process of her community. She should be able to own and manage her property, be fully involved in decisions that are taken by the traditional rulers especially those that concern her directly. She should be able to tell her husband freely what she thinks about family planning. In Cameroon, much of the work done by

women is invisible in the nations accounting despite the social and productive worth of her participation in any decision making process that requires a fundamental remedy. It is for this reason that, the United Nation's Development Program (UNDP) and Agenda 21 urges governments to adopt a variety of objectives and initiate numerous activities aimed at fully and equally integrating women



in all developmental activities and establish plans to increase the proportion of women decision makers involved in the development process. There is an imperative need to give priority to women's concern and raise public awareness about the importance of partnership as a tool for empowerment. The woman contribute greatly to economic growth through agriculture. Her efforts can better be appreciated if she is given equal opportunities as her male counterparts.

Conclusion

A number of steps should be taken to alleviate and empower the typical Cameroonian and third-world woman.

It is crucial that the Cameroonian authorities redefine the status of women and put in place a gender partnership system. The woman should be allowed to take an active part in the development process because much of her work is invisible in the nation's accounting despite her social and productive worth in any decision making process. For this reason, the UNDP(United Nations Development Programme) and Agenda 21 should urge governments to adopt a variety of objectives and initiate numerous activities to help women. Also, it is imperative that priority be given to women's concern and to raising public awareness about the importance of partnership as a tool for empowerment and Development.

