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Responses to Information Requests

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20 September 2012

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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
 Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Frequency and cultural context of early and forced marriages

According to the Cameroon section of School as an Instrument of Peace (École instrument de paix, EIP), an international NGO that [EIP English version] "carries out its activities in the area of human rights, civil society and peace education" (EIP n. d.), early or forced marriages are a [translation] "common, almost cultural," practice in northern Cameroon (ibid. May 2011, 58). The United States Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* points out that early marriages are frequent in the northern regions of Cameroon (US 24 May 2012, 30).

Some sources indicate that there are no statistics about the frequency of child or forced marriages in Cameroon (ibid.; OECD 2012). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the Coordinator of the Association to Fight Violence Against Women (Association de lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes, ALVF) stated that [translation] "no serious study has been conducted yet" on forced marriages in Cameroon and that the only existing data comes from the ALVF (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012). The ALVF coordinator stated that between 2000 and 2011, the organization processed 1,100 cases of violence; over 95 percent of these cases concerned early or forced marriage, while less than 5 percent concerned other forms of violence, in particular, family violence (ibid.).

In 2011, Plan, a non-profit organization that supports social justice for children in developing countries (Plan Canada n.d.), explained that, according to local Cameroonian customs, [Plan English version] "the future and dignity of a girl in Cameroon are secured only in her marital home. Girls are advised to marry at a young age and consequently are forced to finish their schooling early" (ibid. 20 Apr. 2011). During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the President of Child Care Cameroon, an NGO that is dedicated to promoting education and hobbies in children, stated that, in Cameroon, forced marriages are encouraged by customs, particularly in the northern regions, which are dominated by the Muslim traditions and where a certain interpretation of the Koran suggests that women should be under male domination (Child Care Cameroon 10 July 2012). The ALVF coordinator gave the following explanation about the factors contributing to forced marriages:

The far north region, an ALVF intervention zone, is an area where the family system based on the dominant patriarch, combined with the populations' strong attachment to ancestral cultures...is such that marriage is a matter for the parents and not the girls. ...it is two families, who are friends, who are uniting further, and two fortunes that are marrying. Marriage is organized by a friend or a person to whom the family gives all of its trust. In addition, important decisions about living and existing in the families are made by the men. Giving one's daughter in marriage comes from an act of dignity. The family of the young married girl receives all of the honours of the community and worries less about the age of the girl and her consent and even less about the age of the spouse. The daughter's refusal to any proposal by the parents is sacrilegious because she is breaking the social norms and submitting her family to disgrace, considered an insult in the neighbourhood. This act is an affront that the family cannot support, and the young girl, against her will, is sent forcefully into the marriage. ...The value judgment is very powerful and so is the financial parameter. Most often, the father has received the dowry and, if the girl flees, it is her parents' responsibility to reimburse the dowry to the suitor. This is where blackmail occurs. The girl has only two choices: reimburse or accept the forced union. (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012).

According to the President of Child Care Cameroon, girls and women who try to flee forced marriages suffer [translation] "very strong social pressures," characterized by threats, intimidation, insults and rejection by other members of the community, including their own parents (Child Care Cameroon 10 July 2012). The President also stated that girls who resist a forced marriage could be [translation] "beaten" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

The EIP pointed out that some young girls, aged 12 to 16 years old, married sexagenarians, for financial, material or social advantages (May 2011, 59).

2. Law

Article 52 of the Cameroon Civil Code (Code civil camerounais) states the following about the conditions for arranging a marriage:

[translation]

A marriage may not be celebrated if:

1. the girl is under 15 years of age or the boy is under 18 years of age, except when authorized otherwise by the President of the Republic for serious grounds
2. it was not preceded by the publication of the couple's intent to marry
3. the future spouses are the same sex
4. the future spouses are not consenting (Cameroon 1981).

Furthermore, Article 356 of the Cameroon Penal Code (Code pénal camerounais) states the following regarding forced marriage:

[translation]

1. Whoever by force compels any person into marriage shall be punished with imprisonment of five to ten years and by a fine of 25,000 to 1,000,000 francs [CDN\$47 (XE 22 Aug. 2012a) to CDN\$188 (ibid. 22 Aug. 2012b)].
2. When the victim is less than 18 years old, imprisonment may not be less than two years when extenuating circumstances are applied.
3. Whoever gives away in marriage a girl who is less than 14 years old or a boy who is less than 16 years old, shall be punished under the two previous paragraphs. (Cameroon 1967).

Two ALVF representatives wrote the following about the applicable laws in the matter:

[translation]

Despite all of these legal provisions and the proven facts, the state remains passive and lets this practice run rampant.... This passivity may be explained by the fact that, given the law, parents, religious and traditional leaders practice these illegal and non-legitimate unions under the complicit eye of the state, which is supposed to be the guarantor of security for the citizens. The authors of these crimes are not even concerned and live with impunity. (Ngatansou Doumara and Sike 2008)

In addition, the President of Child Care Cameroon stated that the instigators of forced marriages are generally not concerned because the victims often have a feeling of embarrassment and guilt, in addition to being afraid of breaking ties with their family (Child Care Cameroon 22 Aug. 2012).

According to the Population Council, in practice, the law fails to protect most girls (Population Council 2011, 4). Its Internet site states that the Population Council conducts biomedical, social science and public health research, in order to make more effective policies, programs and technologies that improve lives around the world (ibid. n. d.).

In addition, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in Cameroon, young girls just 12 years old are "commonly" married by force, particularly in rural areas (OECD 2012). On its Internet site, Africa for Women's Rights (Afrique pour les droits des femmes) states much the same thing:

[translation]

Although the minimum legal age for marriage is 15 years for women, some young girls, especially in rural areas, are married at 12 years of age. Furthermore, the customary law, which is more discriminatory towards women, also favours the proliferation of forced marriages. (Afrique pour les droits des femmes n.d.a)

Africa for Women's Rights is a campaign launched by regional and international human rights organizations working in Africa, in order to call on African countries to ratify women's human rights protection instruments and to respect them in practice (*ibid.* n.d.b).

The ALVF coordinator stated that complaints regarding forced marriages are [translation] "very rare," because

[translation]

The procedure for filing a complaint is not often easy, because justice is not easily accessible, especially for minor persons, as is the case for young girls. To file a complaint, a person must be of the age of majority, that is, they must be at least 18 years old. In the case of victims of marriage, one member of the family must take it upon them[selves] to file the complaint on behalf of the victim. Moreover, the entourage is most often consenting and even complicit. (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012)

Additional information on the minimum age for filing a complaint could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the ALVF coordinator explained that in 2010, in the city of Maroua, because of her organization's intervention, judicial authorities forced a father to renounce his plans to force his 14-year old daughter to marry, so that she could continue her studies, which she did (ibid. 22 Aug. 2012). Furthermore, the United States Department of State indicated that a case of forced marriage was heard by the courts in 2010, but did not provide further details (US 24 May 2012, 30).

3. Resources for victims of forced marriages

According to the ALVF coordinator, the victim of a forced marriage chooses [translation] "most often to go to religious structures or to associations" (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012). The President of Child Care Cameroon claims that girls and women who try to flee forced marriage turn to NGOs for help (Child Care Cameroon 10 July 2012). Among the NGOs who help these girls and women are Child Care Cameroon (ibid.), Plan (Plan Canada 20 Apr. 2011) and the ALVF (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012).

3.1 Child Care Cameroon

During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the President of Child Care Cameroon explained that the organization focuses the core of its activities on promoting the education and hobbies of children, and that it only started to become interested in cases of forced marriages in 2011, and this followed facts told by the girls to which it was providing support (Child Care Cameroon 22 Aug. 2012). This organization has few resources and functions on donations by volunteers who also make up its entire staff (ibid.). Child Care Cameroon encourages victims of forced marriages to report their case; it provides them with psychological and legal support and raises awareness in parents about the effects of these marriages on the health, education, development and vitality of the child (*ibid.*). According to the President of Child Care Cameroon, since 2011, the organization has only handled one case, in which the outcome had been the reconciliation between a girl threatened with forced marriage and her parents; the President explained that the organization had convinced the girl's parents to abandon their plan to marry her and to let her continue her studies (Child Care Cameroon 22 Aug. 2012). The President added that the majority of the victims that it meets do not want to proceed far in their report out of fear of having their parents arrested (*ibid.*).

3.2 Plan

Through its young ambassadors program, launched in 2004, Plan helps young girls from Cameroon flee forced marriages and return to school (Plan Canada 20 Apr. 2011). Among its activities, Plan organizes workshops and debates to explain, in particular, to parents, students and members of the community the importance of education for girls (*ibid.*). In addition, Plan offers scholarships and a mentoring program to students in primary and secondary levels, focussing more particularly on the regions where the education rates [translation] "are poor or where the members of the groups are the most marginalized-such as young married girls-and they cannot benefit from their right to education" (*ibid.*). The Plan Canada Internet site does not provide clarification about the locations of its intervention or the number of people who have benefited from its services.

3.3 Association to Fight Violence Against Women (Association de lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes, ALVF)

The information from the following paragraph is taken from a document online describing the ALVF (ALVF N.d.).

ALVF fights to eliminate all forms of physical, sexual or moral violence towards women and children, in their private and public life. In 1996, the ALVF launched the independent unit in the far north region, in order to deal more specifically with cases of early and forced marriages and their effects, that is, low education, high-risk youth pregnancies and economic dependence, which become critical in cases of widowhood or abandonment. To carry out its activities, the ALVF created living centres for women (Centres de vie des femmes) and reporting units. It placed these centres in the city of Maroua in 1998, in Kousseri in 2005 and in Langui in 2010. These centres receive women and young girls abandoned by their husbands, victims of rape and of physical violence, and young girls looking to flee early or forced marriages. The centres offer them different services, including attentive listening, the possibility of mediation, and legal and medical support. Furthermore, the centres also serve as meeting and information places, and for obtaining documentation for those who are concerned about violence against women. In 2005 and 2001, the living centres had more than 1,100 beneficiaries, of whom at least 25 percent had acquired more independence by returning to school, by creating micro-enterprises or by learning a trade. The units intervene in the towns as well as in the primary schools with young girls who are under 15 years old. The units focus on awareness campaigns to prevent violence against girls. Among the approximately 20 members in each unit, there are teachers, traditional and religious leaders, parents, students and media representatives. In order to make the victims more independent, the centres of Maroua and of Kousseri founded the Associations to promote the autonomy and rights of girls and women (Association pour la promotion de l'autonomie et des droits de la fille et de la femme, APAD). They enable victims to socialize and help each other find solutions to their problems. The Maroua centre also supports four common initiative groups (groupes d'initiative commune, GIC), which support the activities of 42 individual micro-enterprises through the support of MIFED, a microfinance institution.

The ALVF coordinator stated that, because of the lack of resources, the organization did not have an accommodation centre [translation] "as such," but that it is helped by the Catholic or Protestant nuns for stays that do not exceed two nights (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012).

4. Possibility for women to live alone in Cameroon's large cities

Two sources state that it is possible for a woman to live alone in Cameroon's large cities, such as Yaoundé or Douala, as long as they have the necessary resources; these same sources added that the level of education influences the quality of the employment (Child Care Cameroon 10 July 2012; ALVF 18 Aug. 2012).

The ALVF coordinator pointed out that, whether it is a woman who is alone or a man, [translation] "if a person has financial comfort, they may find accommodations of their choice" (ibid.). According to the ALVF coordinator, there are women who live alone in Cameroon, even in the regions that have [translation] "a strong cultural attachment, where traditions and religion have a strong influence," like the far north region; the coordinator added that the level of education and the social and religious status of a woman who lives alone [translation] "strongly" influence how she is perceived by society (ibid.). The coordinator added that some landlords ask for the marital status of the potential tenants (ibid.). The President of Child Care Cameroon stated that, furthermore, women who live alone may be considered women of [translation] "poor reputation," and members of their family may have to act as guarantors for them so that they may obtain accommodations because, traditionally in this part of the country, the women must live with their parents until they are married (10 July 2012).

However, the President of Child Care Cameroon claims that in cities in the northern part of the country, such as Maroua, it is difficult, even rare, to see a woman live alone (Child Care Cameroon 10 July 2012). In that part of the country, which is generally [translation] "poor" and dominated by Muslim culture, single women suffer from [translation] "many discriminations," especially with respect to access to a job or accommodation, and this is because of the [translation] "distrust that society feels towards them" (ibid.). The President of Child Care Cameroon stated that these women who live alone may be refused a job simply because they reveal this fact during the hiring interview (ibid.). According to the ALVF coordinator, currently in Cameroon, corruption is such that it is more [translation] "difficult to find a job, even with sufficient qualifications, without paying for it or being referred by someone close to the alleged employer. This exposes women to more vulnerability whether they are alone or in a couple" (ALVF 18 Aug. 2012). Additional information on corruption in the labour market in Cameroon could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

A report published in March 2012 by the National Institute for Statistics (Institut national de la statistique, INS) of Cameroon, states that the proportion of female heads of household in 2010 was 27.5 percent in urban areas (Cameroon Mar. 2012, 2). During a telephone interview with the Research Directorate on 21 September 2012, the individual in charge of the Household Living Conditions Monitoring Unit (Cellule du suivi des conditions de vie des ménages) of the INS explained that the expression female [translation] "head of household" refers to single, divorced, widowed, married women or women living common law and who are responsible and the sole financial provider of their family. Furthermore, the same INS report states:

[translation]

In 2010, women were less active than men in Cameroon: of 100 Cameroonian men, 74 were active while of 100 Cameroonian women, only 64 were active. The level of activity was higher in rural areas than in urban areas (76 percent versus 60 percent) and the difference between men and women was not as large in the urban and rural areas.

They were also more affected by unemployment than men: of 1,000 men, 31 were unemployed and of 1,000 women, 45 were unemployed. The unemployment was a more urban than rural phenomenon (8.1 percent against 1.4 percent) and the gap between men and women was not significant in rural areas.

Job insecurity for women: active women work more in the informal sector than active men. Specifically, they work more in informal sectors where performance and incomes are lower, which testifies to the job insecurity for women. (Cameroon Mar. 2012, 4).

The INS report states that more than 93 percent of women in 2010 worked in the informal sector (ibid., 6). The INS report states that [translation] "the active population is made up of all of the population 15 years of age or older, less the disabled, students, retirees and other inactive individuals (discouraged job seekers)" (ibid., 4).

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.

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: African Women's Association, Association camerounaise des femmes juristes, Association pour le développement harmonieux de la mère et de l'enfant, Cameroon – ministère des Affaires sociales et de la Condition féminine, Comité national d'action pour les droits de l'enfant et de la femme, Ewelissane Women in Health and Development, Fédération des associations féminines du Cameroun, League for Women and Child Education, Intact-association.org, Main dans la main, Plan Canada, Réseau d'appui au développement féminin, United Nations Children's Fund, Women's Aid for Development.

Internet sites, including: African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies; Africa Presse.com; Afrik.com; *Les Afriques*; Afrol News; AllAfrica.com; Amnesty International; Camer.be; Cameroon-Info.net; *Cameroon Tribune*; Cameroun Online; Cameroon – Presidency of the Republic; Camnews24; Commission nationale des droits de l'homme et des libertés; Droits de l'enfant.org; ExcelAfrica; Factiva; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Feminist Women's Health Center; Femme Africa Solidarité; Femmes, droit et développement en Afrique; Femmes sous les lois musulmanes; Freedom House; GlobalGiving; Grio.com; *The Herald*; Human Rights Watch; Indymedia; *Jeune Afrique*; Mémoire Online; *Le Messager*; *La Nouvelle Expression*; OpenDemocracy; *Quotidien Le Jour*; *Quotidien Mutations*; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Secretary General's Database on Violence Against Women; *The Vanguard*; Voice of America; Women Aid Collective; Women and Law in South Africa.

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