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Cameroon: Prevalence of forced marriage in southern Cameroon, particularly in the Southwest Region, including state protection available; forced marriage as practiced by chiefs, and whether the girls or women that are forced to marry chiefs must be virgins and childless

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Prevalence of Forced Marriage in Southern Cameroon

Sources indicate that Cameroon is divided into 10 administrative divisions (US n.d.; Political Handbook of the World 2012). According to the Political Handbook of the World, these divisions were called "provinces" until November 2008 when the President replaced "provinces" with "regions" (ibid.). The CIA World Factbook states that the 10 administrative divisions are: Adamaoua, Centre, East, Far North, Littoral, North, Northwest, West, South, and Southwest (US n.d.). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam stated that, due to the way that Cameroon is divided, it is difficult to analyze southern Cameroon as this geographic scope does not exist (Professor 27 Mar. 2013).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the Cameroonian Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family indicated that forced marriage is a "common form of violence against women and girls both in the northern and southern regions of Cameroon" (Cameroon 26 Mar. 2013). Also in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam, whose specialization includes migration and Cameroon, indicated that she came across "several cases" of forced marriage in the south of Cameroon during her research (Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013). A representative of the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Cameroon, also in correspondence with the Research Directorate, similarly indicated that forced marriage is prevalent in "some parts of Cameroon" and is "quite common" in the rural areas of the Northwest Region and the Southwest Region, including Akwaya in Manyu Division, parts of Lebialem, and in "places that still have a lot of respect for traditional rulers or chiefs" (FIDA 30 Mar. 2013). FIDA is an international NGO founded in 1944 in Mexico City that has consultative status with the UN and whose mission is "to promote the welfare of women and children" (ibid. n.d.).

Sources indicate that forced marriages are especially prevalent in rural areas (FIDA 30 Mar. 2013; Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013). However, the

Postdoctoral Researcher added that although forced marriage is more common in rural than urban areas, "connections to the village remain important for anyone living in the city," and provided the example of genital mutilation, which, although is much more common in rural areas, can be performed on women from urban areas when taken back to the village during summer vacations (ibid.).

Sources indicate that the practice of forced marriage varies from region to region (Cameroon 26 Mar. 2013; Professor 27 Mar. 2013). The Professor of African Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam added that, generally speaking, women are nevertheless independent, mobile, and free to divorce (ibid.). However, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family official stated that "there is early betrothal, early/forced or arranged marriage, and the practice of the levirate or sororate for widows and widowers Tradition makes it such that the woman is still considered as 'property'" (Cameroon 26 Mar. 2013). According to the Postdoctoral Researcher, "socioeconomic considerations are very important for marriage in Cameroon and can result in unfree choices" (23 Mar. 2013). She said that young women are often only able to attend university because they are "sponsored" by their boyfriend, which consequently can lead them to feel obliged to marry their boyfriend (Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013). She added that marrying for "love" is not common (ibid.). She said that forced marriages are more common among less educated and poorer families (ibid.). The FIDA representative also indicated that forced marriage is more common among people with a low socioeconomic status (30 Mar. 2013).

1.1 Southwest Cameroon

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the African and African American Studies Program at Carleton College in Minnesota indicated that, in the Southwest Region, "there are many ethnic groups with diverse kinship, lineage, and political systems" (22 Feb. 2013).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Rural Women Development Center (RUWDEC), an NGO located in Buea, Southwest Region, that works on sustainable development and improving the living standards of communities (n.d.), indicated that there are cases of forced marriage in the Southwest Region, but that these cases are "relative to various ethnic groups" (27 Mar. 2013). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of Reach Out, a non profit organization based in Buea (Reach Out n.d.), that conducts advocacy, awareness-raising, and "empowerment" related to the issue of forced marriages, stated that both forced marriage and early marriage occur in the Southwest Region (ibid. 22 Feb. 2013). The Postdoctoral Researcher similarly stated that, in rural areas in southwest Cameroon, "it can easily happen that women have to marry without consent and at an early age" (25 Feb. 2013).

According to the Executive Director of Reach Out, it is "common" for girls to be forced to marry chiefs (22 Feb. 2013). The Postdoctoral Researcher indicated that "if the chief wants to marry a person, the power games with the parents are more complicated and the degree of force can be greater than for forced marriages with ordinary men" (25 Feb. 2013). The Director of African and African American Studies indicated that, unless a political rival is enforcing the forced marriage law, "powerful men such as traditional chiefs could most likely act with impunity" (22 Feb. 2013). Speaking about the southern regions of Cameroon more generally, the FIDA representative stated that it is "quite common" for

chiefs to forcibly marry girls or women, and added that chiefs "have the necessary authority" (30 Mar. 2013).

2. Whether Women Forced to Marry Chiefs in Southwest Cameroon Must Be Virgins and Childless

According to the Executive Director of Reach Out, whether a woman who is forced to marry a chief must be a virgin depends on the chief's preference, as the decision is "up to the chief" (Reach Out 22 Feb. 2013). The Executive Director added that "there have been cases" of chiefs forcing women with children from another man to marry them, but she has heard of only "very few" such cases (ibid.). She also stated that sometimes chiefs take other men's wives, and that this practice is particularly "rampant" in remote areas (ibid.).

The Postdoctoral Researcher stated that "generally speaking, there are no virginity tests before marriage in South West Cameroon" (25 Feb. 2013). Once again referring to the general situation, the Postdoctoral Researcher stated that, depending on the ethnic group, already having had a child may "increase the value of a woman because she has proven her fertility" (25 Feb. 2013). The Postdoctoral Researcher noted that practices relating to forced marriage to chiefs, and whether a woman must be a virgin, "greatly depend on the socio-economic position of the parents of the woman" (25 Feb. 2013).

3. Legislation

According to the legislation in Cameroon, forced marriage is prohibited (Cameroon 1967, Art. 356), and the legal age of marriage is 15 for women and 18 for men, "except when authorized otherwise by the President of the Republic for serious grounds" (ibid. 1981, Art. 52). For more information on legislation pertaining to forced or early marriage, please refer to Response to Information Request CMR104129.

However, in January 2010, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its concern about reports of girls "as young as 12" getting married (29 Jan. 2010, para. 9). The FIDA representative stated that legislation is "not effective" and is "impossible" to implement (30 Mar. 2013). According to the Director of African and African American Studies, forced marriage legislation is enforced "very selectively" (22 Feb. 2013). The Postdoctoral Researcher considered that state legislation related to forced marriage is "extremely unlikely to be able to have any kind of efficiency for women faced with forced marriages" (Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013). The Postdoctoral Researcher also indicated that, in Cameroon, legislation does not have the same authority as it does in North America or Europe (ibid.). She added that cultural norms and practices may be contrary to legislation (ibid.). She also stated that "legal proceedings are extremely long and difficult," and "one only stands a chance of winning a case, if...connected with people within the court" (ibid.). She also said that family affairs are usually regulated by "para-legal systems" (ibid.). Further or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Consequences of Refusing a Forced Marriage in Southern Cameroon

Writing about the consequences for refusing a forced marriage in the south

of Cameroon, the Postdoctoral Researcher said the following:

This will depend enormously on the level of education of the family members and whether this occurs in a rural or an urban setting. When young women flee forced marriages in the village, they will need to be lucky to be able to find shelter with other family members in more urban settings. One of my informants received shelter from one of her brothers in a small town, but had to get a boyfriend in order to finance her schooling. She remained very vulnerable and was not able to return to the village for over 10 years. Another informant of mine found herself so isolated that she fell into the hands of a person who brought her over to Europe in exchange for bonded labour in the sex industry. In general, the refusal of a forced marriage cuts off many social ties that can otherwise serve as a source of social protection. (Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013)

Corroborating or additional information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the FIDA representative, a girl cannot refuse a forced marriage because she would likely not be able to afford to return the money and gifts that have been given to her by the groom's family (30 Mar. 2013).

5. State Protection

The FIDA representative stated that "no one can assist" a girl or a woman who refuses a forced marriage (30 Mar. 2013). The Rural Women Development Center representative indicated that, in the Southwest Region, because forced marriage may be enforced by tradition, cases of forced marriage are "are not reported but rather concealed by traditional rulers and elites who believe and practice it" (27 Mar. 2013). However, according to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family official, "all cases of forced marriage are either reported to [the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family] or its decentralised services for counselling and technical assistance" (Cameroon 26 Mar. 2013). The official also indicated that, during counselling sessions, the Ministry informs and educates families and offers therapy (ibid.). She added that the Ministry's interest is to "maintain harmony and stability in the family" (ibid.). The official further stated that "recalcitrant cases" are forwarded to the court, and for other cases, "the victim reports directly to the competent court in their area of residence, for action" (ibid.). Without specifying the region or the outcome, the US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011* indicated that the courts heard one case of forced marriage in 2010 (24 May 2012, 30).

The Postdoctoral Researcher said that, although the government may have forced marriage programmes, she "very much doubt[s] the efficiency of such programmes" (23 Mar. 2013). She added that, because girls "typically" are forced to marry when they are teenagers, they do not have the "reflex to turn to a government programme and will even fear public authorities," as they believe that the authorities will agree with their parents (Postdoctoral Researcher 23 Mar. 2013). The Professor of African Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam similarly stated that state protection for victims of forced marriage is "very minimal" (Professor 27 Mar. 2013). He indicated that if a woman is rich, she may be able to get a lawyer (ibid.). He also indicated that seeking protection from the police is "very difficult," as the police are corrupt and are often accused of rape

(ibid.). Further or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Association jeunesse verte Cameroun; Centre for Cross-cultural Research on Women, University of Oxford; Community Initiative for Sustainable Development; Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Cameroon; Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town; United Nations Development Fund for Women Cameroon. The following individual and organization could not provide information for this Response: Forum for Women's Advancement and Development, Professor of Anthropology and Black Studies, Amherst College.

Internet sites, including: AllAfrica; Amnesty International; eoi.net; Factiva; GlobalGiving; Human Rights Watch; *Jeune Afrique*; Plan Canada; Rural Women Development and Environmental Organisation; United Nations — Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Human Rights Council, Population Fund, Refworld, Women.

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