



# **Evolving Alliances: Men and Women - Access to Land, Gender Relations and Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon**

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# 01

## MY INTEREST IN WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

**I remember my early years, as I grew up in my small village with unpleasant terrain and a population of a little above 2,000 inhabitants, who were eking out survival from limited land resources.**

The village lies in between two hills, squeezed into a valley by nature and aggressive neighbours. Everyone was either a farmer or grazer, including the sole trader who transported a small box of goods on his head every village market day.

Land was our only source of life, yet too small to comfortably provide a livelihood for all. The battle over land for survival manifested in inter-village and farmer/grazer land conflicts. During these disputes, farmlands were destroyed, crops set on fire and villagers wounded.

Like other women in the village, my mother would cry and complain bitterly, because each conflict was often followed by hunger and famine.

Some of these conflicts were deadly. Women were beaten, and their farm tools or harvests were confiscated; men who were palm wine tappers, or elderly men returning from neighbouring village markets, received the same treatment.

One of these incidents remains engraved in my memory.

This is when women from my village were arrested by gendarmes (military police), a week after they had destroyed a church and several uncompleted buildings that were being constructed on one of the disputed areas by the neighbouring villagers. Construction on this disputed area was a sign of effective occupation.

Those women who were not arrested, gathered food and trekked for days to the administrative headquarters to protest for the others' release from gendarme custody. Men, though they did not accompany them during these protests, languished in psychological pain and spent most of the time strategising the next village move.

Among the few excuses the men advanced for not accompanying the women, was the fear of being arrested due to unpaid annual poll tax of \$5 levied by the government.

Others argued that the gendarmes would prefer to detain them, or levy heavier fines on them than they would for the women. Nevertheless, they could be seen holding meetings and raising funds for our village headmaster to travel to the administrative headquarters and plead for the release of the women.

Throughout the detention of these women, the atmosphere in our village was morose and life was paralysed. Women did not go to the farm, men could hardly graze or go hunting, and all festivals were suspended.

Even the primary school was ineffective, as young men stopped going to school, preferring to hold meetings in small groups to plan or revise strategies to invade and take revenge against our hostile neighbours.

All of these were spontaneous! Although women paid the price in fighting, arrests, detention, and weathering the pressure resulting from eventual food shortages, men always decided which part of the disputed area would be farmed each year. The men, unlike women, took part in negotiations to resolve these inter-village land conflicts.

It was to them that grazers whose animals had strayed and destroyed crops, paid fines. Where were the women?

Why did they not take central stage during these phases of events? These and other questions inspired my interest in understanding gender relations, how men's power over land is construed, and how land conflicts can redefine gender power relations and the roles of women in land matters and development.

For over two decades, I have focused my research and practice on gender relations in both the household and public spheres, working with men, women, public and traditional authorities to promote the role of women in development.

In both contexts, we have tried to identify mechanisms to promote co-existence between men and women within the household, and states and local communities over land rights and sustainable resource use.

While other factors contribute to the gender divide and community neglect in land and resource ownership, poverty and corruption stand tall.

As a result, we have been focusing on organising women, promoting synergies between men and women, and civil society organisations and the state towards inclusive development.

Liaising directly with farming collectives, peasant communities and agricultural organisations in Africa, I have provided technical support and programmatic assistance to help small-scale farmers improve agricultural yields, combat hunger, and strengthen their resilience to poverty-related shocks.

For example, working with projects in Ghana, Cameroon and Uganda, I helped unlock resource constraints hampering finance-deprived female farming communities, by providing technical support in grants writing, incentivising the formation of farming collectives to build social collateral, and engaging in advocacy work with land rights lobbies to increase farmers' access to credit facilities, land rights, high-yielding seeds, agriculture extension support and profitable markets.

To effectively mainstream some of these gender-sensitive actions, we tried to change the mentalities of men towards women through workshops. I created an organisation, Cameroon Centre for Integrated Research and Development (CAMCIRD) in 2016, just before the Anglophone conflicts, to serve as a medium and voice.

This work has had varied reactions from different actors – in some cases, surprising reactions. My work has fascinated many women and women's organisations, who have encouraged me to continue it. Most men, even my colleagues, have found my stance, focus and how I articulate gender issues amusing, but interesting.

I have found that political, administrative and traditional authorities are always happy to listen to me with curiosity and provide interesting feedback.

Some of the greatest resistance has instead come from certain donors, who, though they claimed to be working for gender equality, are less willing to fund projects focused on women and gender equality but led by men.

# 02

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Changing patterns of land access, including widespread land dispossession brought about by liberalisation of land ownership laws, and the sale of land to international agribusinesses and extractive industries, have contributed to Cameroon's rapidly spreading bloody conflict.

Patriarchal norms and laws are often presumed to safeguard men's rights, and thus create conditions for sustained gender inequality in land rights.

However, new dynamics and conflict in Anglophone regions provide some evidence to show that not only do a growing number of men support women's land rights, but conflicts are also redefining masculinity and gender relations, thereby impacting land rights for men and women.

Through analysis of primary and secondary sources, this paper explores the under-reported stories of how men, specifically ordinary men, chiefs and those in the legal profession, are demonstrating support for women's land rights during conflicts in Cameroon. This research further interrogates how Anglophone conflict and other land resistances are impacting gender power relations. In surfacing these stories of change, this paper challenges the frequent lack of nuance in much existing scholarship on the interaction between gender relations, land and conflict in Cameroon. In line with Kopano Ratele's invitation to decoloniality in work on men and masculinities (Ratele 2020), this paper describes the ways in which colonisation disrupted the indigenous land tenure system, and ushered in new powers and instruments of land governance that have been used to try to assert authority over a defiant traditional institution.

These dynamics have thus provided fertile ground for past and current conflicts, and have shaped ideas about manhood.

In bringing to the surface men's evolving support for women's rights to land and for their human rights more broadly, this paper aims to encourage additional scholarship that can identify practical ways to engage and mobilise men to work with women for gender equality and feminist peace.

Hopefully, it also affirms the changes already taking place among more gender-equitable men, strengthens their convictions to stay the course, and encourages more men to step forward and work in solidarity with women to advance rights for all.

Since pre-colonial times, the value of land has changed from a deity, to a commodity that can be bought and sold. This change, accompanied by the replacement of the traditional barter trade with a money economy, promoted private ownership and accumulation of land that firstly creates scarcity, secondly redefines gender relations, and thirdly provokes gender-based, institutionalised, and/or armed conflicts.

Customary laws are currently changing in Cameroon, with evolving societies and mentalities, amid growing conversations and actions by men in support of women's rights to land. For example, women in some localities can now inherit, buy and even sell land without consultation with a male figure (Fonjong et al 2017). In addition, norms about men being head of household and about the nuclear family are beginning to shift towards more egalitarian norms – thereby opening space for more equitable ownership of resources.

Like women, men have suffered the consequences of armed conflict through land dispossession and displacement. Men have fought alongside women against Fulani<sup>2</sup> cattle grazers invading farmlands, and defied land eviction by multinational agro-businesses.

As the Anglophone conflict enters its fifth year, about a million people have become internally displaced persons (OCHA 2022). Displacement has threatened many men's sense of manliness, due to their loss of access to traditional social markers of manhood: livelihood, the status of protector, breadwinner and head of household, and power and control over the land, which has been taken from them by the

military and armed groups (AGs). In addition, there are other dimensions of economic precarity in the agricultural sector, which are impacting men's lives and livelihoods, including those in the cities.

Men's efforts as agents of change and partners in the struggle for women's rights in a predominantly patriarchal Cameroon, are clear to those who look for them.

And this work can be very visible during armed conflicts, because bullets are gender-neutral, although their effects are not.

Policies at all levels should therefore be recalibrated to recognise and address men and women's vulnerabilities during conflicts, and as victims deserving equal but differentiated and targeted attention in visibility, humanitarian assistance and empowerment.

Successful interventions will depend greatly on the capacity of peace actors to be gender-sensitive and supportive of any opportunity that affirms the aspirations of men and women to advance human rights together.

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<sup>2</sup> Fulani, also called Mbororo, are nomadic herdsman found in the Northwest.



# 03

## INTRODUCTION

**Land rights have remained a complex and challenging issue across the African continent, in part due to distortion of land patterns suffered under colonisation and the complex resultant relationships between actors.**

This paper examines the relationship between some of these actors in Cameroon, and particularly how the interplay between state and traditional power structures is informed by statutes and customs, which have created a new national dispensation, especially in Anglophone regions marked by land and other forms of conflicts and changes in gender power relations.

In Anglophone Cameroon, barriers to access to land and its associated resources contribute to conflict, where the impacts are often gender-differentiated.

However, women and men are resisting land dispossession, although at times for diverse motives.

Based on these realities, this paper argues that men's growing support for women's land rights can be affirmed and strengthened, and that it is imperative to build on men's embryonic support for women's land rights and human rights, by understanding its genesis.

# 04

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

### **Land rights in Africa have significantly evolved since pre-colonial times.**

This evolution has partly been driven by colonisation, and the emergence of modern states. Customarily, traditional communities did not regard land as an object capable of individual ownership (Henry 1983; Rayner 1898; Whiteman's Report 1921), but as a deity and collective resource (Fissy 1992).

Individuals, however, could work on the land but without the right to sell it without the consent of the chief or family head (Rayner 1898; Mabogunje 1981). Research has indicated that in terms of gender relations, men and women worked the land together for family survival (Guyer 1984). However, colonisation introduced new crops and a new economic system. Economic shifts throughout both

the colonial and post-colonial periods have introduced new land regulations and reforms, that both altered the traditional land tenure system, but also deepened the gendered division of labour, altered gender relations and shifted the dynamics around people's power over land.

Colonisation ushered in private landownership and fostered the development of gender roles, which placed men as breadwinners and heads of household.

The patriarchal assumptions inherent in these policies, and their unsurprising failure to proactively address gender equality and enshrine women's land rights, despite women's critical roles as food producers, food providers and contributors to food security (Quisumbing et al 1996), is pivotal to many land and resource agitations on the continent.

The struggle to accumulate and control land has fuelled gender-based conflicts, even when men and women work on separate plots (Undry 1994). Furthermore, it has led to conflict between communities and multinational agro-businesses (Fonjong et al 2018).

As is the case in Anglophone Cameroon, some of these conflicts have escalated from mere localised community conflicts to full-blown wars, resulting from their interactions with multiple socio-economic and political grievances.

Although evidence about the relationship between gender and conflict in Africa may be varied, a substantial literature on conflicts recognises the important of gender as a causal factor. Herbert (2014) contends that traditional patriarchal gender identities facilitate militaristic conflicts, and gender equality has an impact on the wealth income and – indirectly – the stability of a country.

While Connell (1995) discusses hegemonic masculinity by highlighting the role of gendered domination and exploitation, Myrntinen, Khattab and Naujoks (2017) argue that hegemonic masculinity discourses should not continue in a vacuum

but, rather, should be grounded within specific contexts to accommodate differences in scopes and complexities.

Wright (2014) and El-Bushra and Sahl (2005) have recognised the link between gender and other socio-economic deprivations, including land, justice, jobs and social amenities, in inciting conflicts.

Patriarchy allows men to exercise what Lukes (1974) has termed “power over decision-making and power to restrict who participate in them”; a double dimension of influence over land that jeopardises women’s leverage to negotiate gender land relations, especially during conflicts.

Women play multiple and overlapping roles including victims, combatants and peace activists during armed conflicts (Tsjeard et al 2005). But because mainstream literature usually portrays men as the sole perpetrators of violence, women are typically painted as powerless victims (Myrntinen, Khattab and Naujoks 2017). As a result, their roles as combatants are under-reported (Oluwaniyi 2019), a phenomenon which Cockburn (2010) believes is linked to patriarchy and militarism.

Yet, most literature contends that men and women are motivated into combat roles differently (Mendie 2019); for women, these motivations can include attempts to avenge abuses on their loved ones and to avoid rape (Rajivan and Senarathne 2011).

The causes, processes and impact of conflicts are therefore gendered, and must be seen as such to be able to effectively mainstream gender in peacebuilding efforts.

In line with Wright and El-Bushra’s discussions of how gender intersects with other societal injustices in the outbreak of conflicts, this paper interrogates the nexus between changing gender relations, women’s land rights struggles, and everyday survival of victims of Anglophone conflict in Cameroon.

Anglophone Cameroon consists of the Northwest (NWR) and Southwest (SWR) regions, representing about 20% of Cameroon’s estimated 25 million inhabitants. Cameroon’s social structure is marked by strong loyalties to ethnic heritage and local villages (Markham and Fonjong 2015).

Despite several legal provisions in the constitution and ratification of other international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Cameroon remains a male-dominated society, in which men are privileged by custom over land ownership and inheritance, even though the country's predominantly agricultural economy is in the hands of women.

Both Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon were former United Nations mandated, and later trust, territories that respectively gained independence from the joint Anglo-French colonial rule in 1961 and 1960 to form a federation.

The federation was later abolished in 1972 in favour of a unitary state, which was historically contested until 2016, when peaceful protests evolved into outright armed conflict. At the time, Anglophone teachers and lawyers began protesting to demand educational and legal reforms to protect their linguistic, Common Law and education identity that is embedded in British cultural heritage, from "francophonisation".

For example, Francophone civil servants were deployed to teach and administer justice without the necessary legal and English

language background in schools and Common Law courts in Anglophone regions (International Crisis Group 2017; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2019; Awasom 2020).

The government response to the strike with threats, intimidation, arrests and other measures, created room for new political demands to form, and for broader segments of Anglophones to join the teachers and lawyers.

The government's decision to utilise military action in 2017 in the face of popular movements, propelled the descent into a complex, ugly war that has claimed over 3,000 lives, with about a million people displaced (UN 2020 and International Crisis Group, 2021).

# 05

## METHODOLOGY

**This paper is largely based on the author's database of published and unpublished scholarship on the subject, some of which has been applied without direct quotation.**

Most of the primary data comes from field observations, conversations and interviews conducted by the author and his team from 2008 to 2016 during multiple field visits to the Anglophone regions. Direct quotes have been extracted from some of these interviews, or from the quotations bank created during these studies.

Additionally, this paper draws from seven informal telephone conversations conducted in June 2021, with men and women directly affected by the Anglophone conflict living in Buea and Bamenda, the author's personal notes, and a few anecdotes from researchers in the field.

This data has been complemented by content analysis of social, print and audio-visual media news reports on the Anglophone conflict.

# 06

## DRIVERS OF LAND CONFLICTS IN ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON

**Forest area in Cameroon has been declining, with the commoditisation of land and the growth of small and large-scale agriculture and urbanisation.**

Prior to these developments, inheritance was a key means of land transfer per custom. While inheritance remains an important means of land ownership, community members, including women, can also legally acquire land through purchase, gifts or resettlement (Fonjong et al 2017).

The introduction of cash crops and animal grazing during colonisation, and the changes to the political economy of households (Goheen 1992) have created a gender dichotomy where cash crops are “male” and subsistence food crops “female”.

These shifts serve as a prelude to eventual land scramble and conflicts, driven by land privatisation, titling, expropriation, grabbing and scarcity (Konings 2003; Fonjong 2016).

Unemployment, poverty and food insecurity, caused by landlessness and dispossession, at times without compensation, have contributed to community tensions.

Left without farmland and a secure source of livelihood, Cameroonians are increasingly resisting the status quo. Historical frustrations and concerns that began as waves of ordinary women’s activism, resistance and corporate strikes, have escalated.

# 07

## ANGLOPHONE CONFLICT, POWER DYNAMICS AND GENDER RELATIONS OVER LAND

**Cameroon launched a new development vision for 2035, which gave prominence to large-scale mechanised agriculture, termed *second-generation agriculture*, to fight poverty and promote national food self-sufficiency.**

In implementation of this development strategy, several urban male elites put together bank loans and savings, and with the complicity of local chiefs, acquired large expanses of land where they started large-scale modern plantations of oil palm, cocoa, coffee, fruit, and other food crop varieties.<sup>3</sup> The actions of the new bourgeois “*planteurs*” and other multinational agro-business investors divested villagers from the lands they had lived on, but also resulted in some increased youth employment as plantation labourers.

Since 2016, the Anglophone conflict has not only affected the economic situation of the crisis regions,

but has also profoundly shaped masculinity and gender power relations. Generally, most traditional national and international rhetoric has largely focused on the impacts of the conflict on women, who are rhetorically positioned within the frame of victim, for example (International Crisis Group 2022).

However, there has been comparatively little attention to how men have experienced rapid shifts in their roles vis-à-vis social and economic structures. As the conflict evolved from corporate protest to outright war, the government has managed to maintain some degree of control in a few urban areas, leaving the hinterlands as the epicentre of war. This situation has profoundly affected men, as even chiefs who used to own, sell or graze on extensive land, today have no control over the land and what is done on it, and instead armed groups<sup>4</sup> and the Cameroon military do.

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<sup>3</sup>Field work, June 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Anglophone armed groups are difficult to define. Generally, they consist of many groups of fighters owing allegiance to different fractions (Interim Government, IG or Ambazonian Defence Forces – ADF), fighting for separation from Cameroon and living in a new country, Ambazonia.

Moreover, the historical powers of the chiefs over their people or to mediate between them and their ancestors has been significantly eroded because of the politicisation of chieftaincy. They are not only patrician, but are also no longer seen as the sacred voices of the people to invoke “ancestral mediation” between the state and armed groups in the current crisis stalemate. Instead, they are seen as closely aligned with the government. The war has introduced a new wave of displacement for village men working on cocoa and coffee farms, many of whom were previously displaced by bourgeois farmers. Some farms have been burnt down by the warring parties in Meme, Ndian or Manyu (SWR), and the men who farmed them have become refugees outside the conflict zones. Plantation owners in these areas have limited access to their farms, because of a credible fear of being taken as hostages, and because they are viewed by some armed groups as being enablers of the government.

Several plantations have been abandoned, others confiscated, and others are only accessible with significant bribes. Mola, one individual in Buea, lamented that he will never be able to pay his loans back from purchasing the farm, but that his choice is between his life and his land.

As a result of the conflict, young people who gained employment in state-owned plantations of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), Pamol in (SWR), or Ndawara and Ndu Tea Estates (NWR) have lost these jobs and either become internally displaced, or coerced into joining armed groups. Many men have lost their status as providers for their families, as they now depend on their wives or other relatives for their livelihoods.

This has impacted their sense of manhood and life trajectories. As Ndi in Bamenda confessed, “I abandoned my plantation job and farms, and I am unable to get even a little to feed the family... am I still a man like this?” Young women’s roles and lives have also been significantly impacted. Social media videos also show young women fighting alongside men within armed groups, although this has been under-reported in mainstream discourses.

Oluwaniyi (2019) has noted similar gender-blind mainstream discourses on women’s combat role during conflicts. When women’s roles are obscured, they are likely to miss out from post-war benefits reserved for ex-combatants.

In addition, many female internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees have suffered from violations, including rape and sexual and economic exploitation.

Field work<sup>5</sup> reveals that for the male and female villagers who have dared to remain in unsecured areas such as Ekona, Mautu, Owe and Bafia, men are compelled to pay a “monthly tax” of at least CFA10 (\$20) and women are compelled to regularly contribute local foodstuff to separatist non-state armed groups, in order to access their already devastated farms. If there is a failure to comply with these mandates, individuals have been kidnapped, tortured, had money extorted, or been extrajudicially executed, in addition to other violations they have suffered from government forces.

Njoh, a male farmer from Ekona (SWR) noted that:

“I now been reduced to a nobody, being forced to surrender my farming rights to some young men who could not even come near me before the crisis. I cannot even make ends meet, because we are extorted by both the military and armed groups.

<sup>5</sup> Field work, June 2021.



But if I do not pay the required tax required by the AGs, where will my family eat? We will die of hunger and extreme poverty. I must continue, only God will help us.”

Insecurity and indiscriminate kidnapping for ransom are rampant in the region, even among state officials who dare to engage in land business.

Six senior local government officials, including one woman, were kidnaped in Ekondo Titi (SWR) on a land demarcation mission to the area in June 2021. The kidnappers demanded FCFA50m (\$100,000) as a ransom (Equinox TV 2021).

Many Cameroonians from the Anglophone regions have become IDPs in Francophone areas, or refugees in Nigeria, where they experience persistent insecurity.

Of the over 60,000 Anglophone refugees in four Nigerian states, the majority are not sheltered by the UNHCR, but instead live with host families.

To survive, they receive \$20 monthly from the UNHCR to cover food and basic needs.

This amount is not enough for refugees’ large families, forcing men to work as farm labourers for a meagre \$1.4 per day and for women to trade and/or farm (Unah 2020).

Similarly, IDPs in urban centres or Francophone regions live in difficult conditions (Wakuna and Ndongo Kitio 2020).

They experience stigma, poverty, prejudice, language barriers and limited access to opportunities, as they try to adapt to a new life.

Poverty and financial instability have been found to significantly challenge men’s self-esteem (Strier et al 2014; Izugbara and Egesa 2020).

Mainstream portrayals of Anglophone men in the media and popular discourse as violent, have directly contributed to their heightened vulnerability.

Many men have been forced from villages, and IDPs have been less able to proactively and visibly look for ways to earn their livelihoods. As men’s movements decrease, gender roles are shifting, as women IDPs and refugees take up new roles

hitherto reserved for men. Perceived as “more harmless”, women are those who can afford the risk to return to insecure villages for funerals and emergencies, and even preside over family meetings and take decisions.

Similarly, many women in insecure villages are experiencing new roles and power, where, in the absence of men, they oversee village meetings, bury the dead and receive visitors.

This experience aligns with the observations of Tripp (2015) that conflicts sometimes do not only alter gender roles, but also create opportunities for women’s political power, although the sustainability of these shifts in post-conflict periods remains doubtful.

# 008

## NEW PERSPECTIVES OF CHIEFS TOWARDS WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

### Historical dynamics around power relations between chiefs/customs and the state/statute over land are critical to current struggles for land rights.

Before European colonisation, most Africans lived in small tribes and groups ruled by tribal leaders and chiefs, with agriculture as the main source of livelihood. Colonial and post-independence administrations introduced two new elements (the state and land laws), marking the start of a complex and often contested land tenure system, characterised by conflicts between customs and statutes, the state and chiefs, and men and women, within an ever-changing gender relation.

In customary Cameroonian societies, land is not bought and sold. It is a deity, a link between the people and their ancestors with chiefs considered to be high priests. Men's powers devolve from the chief, who holds the land in trust for the people following local customs.

People's rights to land could be ax/blood or territorial/usufruct as in the south (Diaw 1997), where a community has collective rights over a delineated land.

Individuals acquire usufruct rights over a portion of this land by clearing and developing it. On the other hand, citizenship rights, as with the Nso tribe (NWR), (Goheen 1992), are acquired and transmitted by inheritance across generations via the patrilineal and not matrilineal lines.

Both men and women worked on the land following complementary gender roles, where men will clear for the woman to plant (Guyer 1981).

Land conflicts were rare, firstly because people had sufficient resources through their male family heads; secondly, land rights were clearly defined by custom: the chiefs owned the land on behalf of the entire community, male family heads controlled the family land, and women and strangers had access/use rights to the land (Diaw 1997; Kaberry 1952).

<sup>3</sup>Field work, June 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Anglophone armed groups are difficult to define. Generally, they consist of many groups of fighters owing allegiance to different fractions (Interim Government, IG or Ambazonian Defence Forces – ADF), fighting for separation from Cameroon and living in a new country, Ambazonia.

The male chief's authority is derived from his high morality, sacred or mystical powers to perform rites, and invocation of ancestral judgements and blessings. Violation of the sacred oath and trust between the chief and his people often invites heavy penalties and ancestors' judgements. This trust sustains chiefs' control of the people and their land, and prevents their own abuses. As a sacred institution led by strong men of morals, chieftaincy was revered, hereditary and stable. However, strong or moral rulers are not necessarily the wisest and most experienced in leadership, and can retard the development of an entire community, since they cannot be easily dethroned. Colonisation and the advent of the modern state have significantly tested the balance and harmony between the trio of people, land and chief. Colonial policies focused on conquest, control and promotion of private land ownership through land registration (Sorenson 1967; Njoh 1998) leading to the decline of chiefs.

The focus of colonial and later post-colonial administrations on private land ownership, shifted the spiritual meaning of land into a factor of production (Goheen 1988), and initiated the start of legal pluralism (customary and statutory laws) over land.

It gradually destabilised the chief-land-people trilogy and further produced other agents of land accumulation and scarcity. This destabilisation of previous power structures created new elites and social stratification, that affected existing gender relations, shifting men's power especially with the introduction and differentiation of cash and food crops defined along gender lines, and the replacement of trade by barter. African chieftaincy institutions today may have declined, but they have not experienced the demise predicted in earlier periods (Balandier 1972). Multiple challenges from UPC-led armed resistance<sup>6</sup>, and the fragility of re-unification between French and British Cameroons, forced the post-independence administration to co-exist with traditional leadership.

However, to consolidate its control over the chiefs and land, the state set about transforming chiefs into salaried auxiliaries of its administration and placed them under local administrators. Today, chiefs contest elective political power with subjects through parliamentary or municipal representations.

However, as custodians of national land, the embattled chiefs remain relevant in land matters, in part by enforcing gender-discriminatory customary practices and outcomes.

As both custodians of land and guarantors of customs that partly negate women's land rights, chiefs are critical to the fight for equal land rights. Many communities still believe in the mystical powers of blessings and curses of native customs, which maintain that landownership is gendered.

That is why the Chief of Babessi (NWR) observes that discrimination against women's land rights is "a matter of mentality, as every parent would like to preserve land for as many generations of his progeny as possible". His colleague from Babungo believes that nothing should prevent a girl child from inheriting land (Fonjong et al 2011). Chiefs can potentially be catalysts of paradigm shifts: during a symposium in 2011 on women's land rights in the NWR, some chiefs expressed progressive remarks and agendas in support of equal land rights. By creating an enabling environment and setting examples even for their daughters to inherit land, chiefs could sway those still reluctant to join the crusade.

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<sup>6</sup> The UPC (Union des Populations du Cameroun) was a radical political party that fought for total independence from France.

Although several Northwest *fons* (chiefs) believe that gender-unequal customs should be stopped, Fon Muntong III of Babessi argues that gender bias is based on mentality, not necessarily customs.

Changing mentality is important; as Fonjong et al (2017) reported, 21% of women surveyed in Anglophone Cameroon were against women owning land, because of their customary belief that men are heads of households.

About 48% of women in the same survey reported that they prefer that their sons inherit their land, rather than their daughters. They defended these choices by citing outdated clichés, such as “the boys will have kids” or “what belongs to a son belongs to the entire family”.

The public utterances, attitudes and land reform initiatives so far displayed by some chiefs, are positive signs for gender equality, including proposals that special slots be reserved for the education of their subjects on women’s inheritance rights during annual village festivals and traditional council meetings. If adhered to, this plan could serve as a catalyst of attitudinal change.

Other chiefs advocated for women to be represented on the Land Consultative Board, expressing views like those of Chief Akam of Kai (NWR) that “women have been farming on the land for a long time and so know the land boundaries as well as understand land issues better”. This call from an influential chief who doubles as Secretary-General of the Northwest Chief Union could have a significant impact.

While some chiefs believed that the idea of female inheritance should be pursued with caution, others, like Chief Mbafor III of Ashong, have already authorised girls to inherit land in his chiefdom. This development is an important departure from customs and the views of major chiefs, like Paramount *Fon* Yuh of Kom, who insists that: “...women, be they daughters or widows, cannot inherit/own land in their own right because a woman cannot perform libation rites over the land and if she dies no-one succeeds her... A compound is on land where traditional rites of libation [tenure rites] are performed, and land owned by a woman because she has a title in her name is only a house not a compound... any rites of libation over that land are performed by men.”

Land redistribution has become a vital way of permanent acquisition. Some of the land held by colonial plantations, such as land belonging to the CDC, and others whose deeds have expired (Konings 1993), are being surrendered to native Cameroonians. Furthermore, land is being acquired during resettlement, especially after displacements.

While all these developments offer new possibilities for women to own land, the attitudes of chiefs and men who control and distribute surrendered land determine how far women can go.

Though chiefs follow native laws strictly in the allocation of surrendered land to community members, some like the Chief of Muea (SWR) allocate land to women in their personal names. But this act and the land have strings attached: she must be unmarried and living in the family compounds, and the land cannot be sold, only transferred to her son.

To do so, the chief affixes a seal on the said land document with the inscription, “Not for sale”. The Chief of Wonya Maveo (SWR) allots land to men and women with the same rights, and without “no ban to sell” as is the case in Muea.

# 009

## UNITED RESISTANCE AGAINST EXTERNAL LAND INVASION

### Women and men's resistance against land expropriation in Cameroon can be traced far back in history.

Before independence, the women of Bambuliwe (NWR), along with their babies, staged a sit-in overnight protest against the invasion and destruction of farmland/crops by animals owned by Fulani herdsmen.

Two children died in the cold weather conditions, which almost led to an escalation, that was interrupted due to the rapid intervention of the local administration (Buea archives 1951). A similar protest by women of the neighbouring Kom clan succeeded in pushing back against the Fulani occupation of farmlands during the First and Second *Anlu* of 1958 and 1959 (Nkwi 1985). Additionally, in 2003, 8,000 women and members of *Ndumfugwi*<sup>7</sup> held their *fon* hostage in response to corrupt land deals with Fulani grazers.

They attempted to march 80km to Bamenda, the regional capital, because the local administration failed to address

their complaint. The women even refused to plant during an entire farming season, causing price hikes for corn, a staple crop, and other social tensions. The *Fumbwen*<sup>8</sup> of Babanki (NWR), from 2006 to 2007 successfully brought down their chief after 20 years of corrupt rule. Fonchingong et al (2008), noted that the chief's misrule was marked by alienation of large-scale land to grazers, and insensitivity to the demands of women, which pushed the female sacred society, later joined by males, to kill the chief.

Although Fonjong et al (2016), Fonchingong (2008) and Nkwi (1985) have all written on the bravery of these women against grazers and corrupt local chiefs and state officials, there is no doubt that their efforts were not without the support of men, either through acquiescence or as accomplices.

Without minimising the leadership and exploits of *Anlu* of Kom-Boyo, *Ndumfugwi* of Wum-Menchum, *Fugbwen* of Babanki-Mezam, men, and particularly young men, supported women's struggles to claim their land, and did not oppose their advocacy.

<sup>7</sup>An assembly of women's traditional groups.

<sup>8</sup>Women's traditional resistance movement

Women have also supported men in their resistance to major events. Anglophone men led the resistance against the privatisation of the CDC and its land in 1990s as part of the structural adjustment measures of the IMF and World Bank. The government's bid for privatisation ignited a united Anglophone front that included chiefs, politicians, elites and civil society in protest; attributing the move to attempted betrayal of Anglophone's socio-cultural and political heritage by the Francophone-led state (Konings 2003).

From 2009 to 2014, women in Ndian and Kupe (SWR) joined men to petition the government against the acquisition of over 73,000 hectares of land by SG-SOC, a subsidiary of the United States-based agro-company, Herakles Farms (Fonjong 2019).

They found common ground in the fact that they were sidelined in the process of acquisition, which they deemed corrupt, damaging to the environment, and full of many failed promises of jobs, roads, water, electricity and other social amenities. While men and local chiefs addressed several concerns to the administration regarding the population's risk of losing local livelihood to the plantations, women and the youths physically protested on the land,

blocking access into the plantations in 2013 (Wanki and Ndi 2019). Men were among those who stood up against the asymmetrical power relations between authorities and foreign investors that is often skewed to favour the latter (Cotula et al 2014), arguing that the company's huge acquisition deprived women of farmland.

From 2010 to 2013, villagers from Fabe and Nguti blocked access to the company's oil palm nursery several times, resistance that was met with a reaction from law enforcement. Nasako Besingi, a native and civil society activist, organised a mass protest in 2013 with community support, during the visit of the regional governor to the area, against the plantation and government support for it.

The T-Shirt Protest, as it was later called, because the more than 400 protesters wore T-shirts with the inscription "No plantations on our land. Herakles out", led to the arrest of several protesters, including Besingi, who had been previously arrested and tortured several times for his advocacy against land grabbing and support for women's rights.<sup>9</sup>

Another protest in 2014 by the village of Babensi II, demanded that the company quit and provide compensation for damage already caused during the period, which they termed "illegal occupation".

Land grabbing by multinational companies in Africa has demasculinised and disempowered rural men (Izugbara and Egesa 2020), which in some cases has forced them to pursue complementary, rather than hegemonic, relationships with women. By throwing its weight behind the plantation companies over the land question, many people believe that the Cameroonian government has betrayed these communities, and sowed seeds of deep animosity with the local people. This has contributed over time to making this area one of the frontline sites of the Anglophone war since 2017.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of men and women's partnership in fighting for community welfare depends on the extent to which new gender norms are embraced by male-dominated institutions and chieftaincy, as in some localities of Fako Division, discussed in the next section.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nasako Besingi Nasako, Mundemba, 12 February 2015.

# 10

## PROGRESS THROUGH MEN-LED JUDICIAL ACTIVISM AND SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S STRUGGLE

### Both customary and statutory land laws are enforced by male-dominated judges in traditional councils and state courts, and the application of these laws has significant impacts on women's land rights.

While most statutory regulations in Cameroon are gender-neutral, customs are generally gender-biased. The Cameroon Common Law requires judges to apply customs if they respect Section 27(1) of the Southern Cameroons High Court Laws of 1955, which provides that such "custom is not repugnant to natural justice, equity, good conscience". The appreciation of whether a practice follows Section 27(1) is the prerogative of the judge. Many instances reveal a lack of consistency among judges in their application, as illustrated in the case of *Zamcho Florence v Chibikom Peter Fru & others*.<sup>10</sup>

In this case, Florence, married, had obtained letters of administration as next of kin of her father's estate of Chibikom, which was later contested unsuccessfully in the High Court by her dissatisfied brothers.

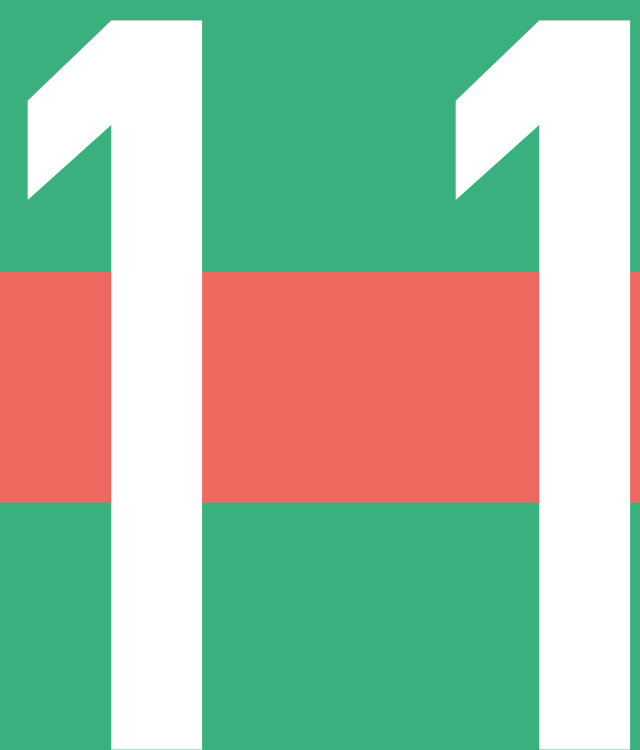
However, the Appeal Court sided with the brothers, and revoked the letters on grounds that Florence was a married woman now belonging to another family, and could not inherit from her father according to native law. The Supreme Court of Cameroon, nevertheless, overturned the Appeal Court's Decision noting that:

"Not only was the decision... based on sex discrimination in gross violation of the... Constitution, but it was in total misrepresentation of S27 of the Southern Cameroon High Court Law which ensures the observance of custom only on the sole condition that it is neither repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience" (Ngassa 2012).

This case demonstrates how three courts had two different interpretations of the same custom.

The Appeal Court judges had strong appeal to customary values; their colleagues of the High and Supreme Courts did not. Judicial activism is therefore important in the promotion of women's land rights, especially where there is conflict or confusion between statutes and customs.

<sup>10</sup> *Zamcho Florence v Chibikom Peter Fru & others*. Supreme Court Judgement No 14/L of 14 February 1993 (unreported).



# MEN'S ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR LAND RIGHTS

While customary practices in Cameroon facilitate that boys and men are given land at marriage, to take care of their children (Koultchoumi 2008), these ensure that family land is taken away from girls and women. But men's view of male monopoly of inheritance is changing. In a survey among 2,029 inhabitants in Anglophone Cameroon, Fonjong (2012) reported that although 50.4% of the respondents (the majority of whom are women) still maintained a preference for male children to inherit, 39% preferred both sexes.

A minority of those in support of both sexes pushed for ensuring gender equality. Surprisingly, 58% of male respondents preferred their daughters to inherit and not their sons. These male respondents reported that inheritance by girls protects families with single-sex children, and additionally that girls generally demonstrate more responsible attitudes than their brothers.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with K Ngam, Mayor of Fundong, NWR, 20 February 2009.

However, although the long-term gender effect may be gender equality, male dominance will continue to exist until these expectations are mainstreamed into everyday land transactions.

To other men, women's inheritance rights are human rights: "women and men should be entitled to succession and be giving a voice over family land... Custom is unjust to women who produced most of the food not to own land," observed a former Mayor of Fundong.<sup>11</sup>

He adjudicated land conflicts in favour of women, to circumvent customary huddles as evidence of solidarity with women. In the same vein, a growing number of men have purchased land in the names of their wives or children, so that in case of death without a will, they cannot be bereft of their hard-earned land. Though this transaction cannot be done with inherited or family land, statutes allow women to also buy and own land.



Male advocates for women land rights like Barrister Bobga,<sup>12</sup> opined that land registration confers full ownership on a wife/daughter, protecting them from extended family members who, under the guise of custom, ignore the widow to claim inheritance rights on the estate of the deceased husband.

Other men are advocating for traditional communal farming to be converted to individual holdings, with the potential to promote private land ownership for women.<sup>13</sup> Communal farms practise shifting cultivation, where plots are allocated to individuals with just users' rights, and the farmers are reallocated somewhere else when the yields begin to decline. Communal farming prevents long-term investments in the land. Advocates like Mayor Cheng believe that communal farms should be converted to permanent farms, with ownership rights given to women on these farms.<sup>14</sup>

If this were to happen, women would gain absolute land rights and be safe from frequent clashes with grazers, who at times, have connived with corrupt officials to invade their farms because the land is communal.

In both cases of conversion of communal farms to women's private land, and men titling land in the names of their wives and daughters, we see a new class of men concerned more with civic and family welfare, and less about masculinity, power or control.

In fact, there is a reciprocal rise in the numbers of joint land titles in the name of husband and wife in Cameroon, due to changing mentalities and some gender-sensitive land registration statutes. Joint land registration protects widows from lengthy administrative procedure prior to custody of the property and harassment from in-laws. Despite the cumbersome process of titling in Cameroon, about 4% of all land registered between 1980 and 2010 was joint (Yanou and Sone 2012). Though low, these numbers are a sign of progress. Land titles enable women to apply for bank loans, transfer the land and partake in land decisions which, otherwise, they could not.

The number of women landlords could continue to rise, as more women own land through gifts of land deeds or titles from their parents.

Elizabeth, 55, is among the rare women of her generation to own such piece of land, with houses at the town centre in Ekona (SWR). She reveals that the property was a gift from her father while alive:

"I am from a polygamous family with many brothers. My father loves me so much and made this land to me as a gift with the land deed... because of the deed, I feel no pressure from my brothers or my father's wives."

Other women have obtained land through gifts from chiefs. These are, however, mostly elite women with powerful political positions, who are given land by their villages as signs of honour and recognition. While one may argue that land is not necessarily given to them as women but to their positions, or that it discriminates against ordinary women, this nonetheless shows some signs of change.

It demonstrates that some men recognise powerful women, and are not afraid of sharing power and control over resources without competing for the same roles in society.

<sup>12</sup> Prominent Bamenda-based human rights activist. Interviewed at Bali, 22 February 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Fieldwork, February 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with E Cheng, former Mayor, Wum, NWR, 18 February 2009.

# 12

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed changes in land ownership in Cameroon, the effects of these changes on women's land rights, and how other social dynamics including conflicts are redefining gender power relations, men's roles and attitudes towards women.

There are emerging opportunities created by socio-economic dynamics for women's struggle for land rights to be supported by men who see women not as rivals, but as partners in the advancement of their households and communities. The Anglophone conflict is redefining gender roles and pushing most men to the margin of decision-making, while concentrating power in the hands of those who are using violence.

For most men reeling from the consequences of the conflict, perhaps especially those who are now IDPs or refugees, conflict has challenged men's manliness in their ability to meet their social obligations to protect, provide and decide, as gender roles are being modified.

Framed differently, men, like women, are also vulnerable and affected by armed conflicts.

Conflicts do not always provide avenues for men to be portrayed as powerful, hegemonic and even supportive of violence. Rather, men, women, the public and chiefs, all appear to be victims and are overwhelmed by institutional and physical conflicts.

In reality, they can be more allies than adversaries, confronted by the same economic interests and vulnerabilities, fuelled by public policies that sometimes lack humanity, prevention and effort.

A closer look suggests an ongoing quest for new mentalities, synergy, mutual respect and recognition resonating among growing numbers of Anglophone Cameroonians, which can culminate into a better lifestyle for all, rather than one defined along gender lines. Does this therefore imply men are turning their backs against gender-bias customs, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity for progressive political and social change and gender equality in Cameroon?

It is too early to conclude. With 77% of public schools still shut down in 2017 (ReliefWeb 2021; Wakuna and Ndongo Kitio 2020) by the Anglophone conflict, the critical role of education in transforming patriarchal gender beliefs and attitudes may be impeded, and male power and economic dominance maintained after the war. Thus, compromise by both warring parties to end the conflict is imperative.

A long-term shift in norms depends how far authorities can learn from or transform the few opportunities offered into possibilities.

Building gender-sensitive institutions and gender capacities of chiefs, judges, state officials and others, by the Ministries of Justices, Territorial Administration, Land or the parliament, so that they can enact and enforce gendered land legislations, are important steps.

Civil society and mainstream and social media can also be critical in promoting positive actions from a few men that can be contagious to an entire society.

Yet, the Anglophone conflict and gender bias in land rights are mere symptoms of the greater vices of poverty and injustice, which are entrenched in a society that is asking for a radical revolution in values. And the Cameroonian government, political parties, politicians and international partners, must recognise that only change itself can contain this revolution.

# 13

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# **Evolving Alliances: Men and Women - Access to Land, Gender Relations and Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon**