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‘Every woman around the world has something to learn from Cameroonian women’

Winner of the German Africa Prize, Sally Mboumien, on the ongoing civil war in Cameroon, violence against women and their fight for peace

In 2017, English-speaking separatists started a rebellion against the Francophone central government of Cameroon. Since then, there have been regular armed clashes in the country. What does the current situation look like?

As a country with a colonial past, Cameroon is home to two communities: the minority that speaks English, making up 20 per cent of the entire population, and a majority of 80 per cent French-speaking Cameroonians. According to the principle of official endorsement as well as our constitution, Cameroon is a bilingual country. This diversity, which is supposed to be a strength for Cameroonians, has meant that there are differences among the two communities. This is further compounded by issues of bad governance, the lack of civic engagement, an unequal distribution of resources, poverty, as well as weak health institutions. This has aggravated the situation in such a way that the faction that speaks English feels like they are being assimilated. Thus, the English-speaking regions started fighting the government in 2017, demanding greater self-determination.

Cameroonians, especially in the English-speaking regions and the neighbouring regions, have experienced first-hand dehumanising acts of violence and violations of their rights, perpetrated by both state forces and non-state forces. This has led to the displacement of thousands of people to neighbouring regions, as well as to Nigeria and Ghana. If we fast forward seven years in this conflict, six years of which have been violent, we can see that there is a new dynamic. The enthusiasm, the euphoria that provided the motivation for picking up arms and fighting back against the government in 2017 no longer

exists. People now experience a certain fatigue. Most of those who thought the conflict would end in a day or two are tired of suffering, and they are looking for alternatives.

What is the situation for women and children like?

Women and children are experiencing a lot of stress because they are affected very heavily by the conflict. Many are unable to fend for themselves. With the conflict, their caregiving burden has increased as they have taken over the role of 'family head'. But some of these women are unable to even put food on their children's plates. In order to survive, many of them have started to engage in transactional sex. At the same time, women are also experiencing the highest level of conflict-related sexual violence. Abuse has increased violations of their bodily autonomy. It's at the peak, there is rape everywhere, and you have children giving birth to children.

On top of that, many children have been out of school for the past six years now. We are still trying to rebuild the educational system, but we cannot guarantee the quality of education. School attendance in the Northwest used to be at 18 000 students. Now, there are only 2 000 students left. Even considering that many students are going to schools in other regions, there are 8 000 missing children of which we cannot account for where they have gone. This means a generation of illiterates, deprived of formal learning, education of the mind or any kind of skills acquisition.

The '1st National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon' took place in July 2021 under the slogans 'We, Women of Cameroon, are longing for peace' and 'Let us no longer accept that they speak for us — let us speak for ourselves', with more than 1 800 participants from all 10 regions of Cameroon. How did you come to organise this convention?

Cameroonian women and girls have traditionally been ascribed to the role of peacebuilders and peace mediators. This means that most women were already resolving conflicts within their family or community. It is important to remember that when men strive for leadership, they add power and want to be in control. But when women start striving for leadership, they are doing it for survival. They need a space that enables them to contribute to their own growth. Cameroonian women have always been working together and have made use of their indigenous expertise. This continuous consciousness was the reason for us to start coming together. At first, we organised joint actions at different levels, until we eventually reached the regional level. At the 1st National Women's Peace

Convention, we saw that there is a need to combine all these sources of power, the many ways in which women respond to the violence, into one national platform where we would discuss and strategise.

Which consequences followed afterwards, especially for women?

Women faced online and offline attacks and attempts at instrumentalisation. We were blackmailed, silenced and assaulted. Building peace means stopping business for many powerful people. But these people are not ready to give up their power, money or control. So, women come under attack as they are struggling to clean up the rubbish that these men are creating for their communities. As we came together, we knew that we were going to have these kinds of problems, and we started preparing for them, for instance through trainings for personal security. We started being conflict-sensitive to be able to surmount these challenges.

In 2022, you held simulated peace negotiations with various civil society organisations. What was the aim? And what were your demands?

We want sustainable peace. And our demand for the future is that we receive greater support for women peacebuilders in Cameroon. We need technical support for certain things where we do not possess the required expertise. Women should also have a flexible basket of funding, so that, if they come under attack, they can seek, for instance, mental health support. We also need support for women to be able to address the root causes of conflict through the so-called package of democracy and political action. Last but not least, we should also strive to achieve a power balance to ensure social justice for all. In doing so, we need to strategically work to bring gender equality and equal access to opportunities to our communities.

Which steps must follow now? What else is needed in order for women's perspectives to be taken seriously and for them to sit at the negotiating table and be part of the peace-building processes?

The first step that should follow is to recognise women's indigenous expertise. They should allow women peacebuilders a certain breathing space by not predefining what 'women peacebuilding' is at the global stage but by acknowledging and supporting the practical application of the concept in our communities. We should recognise that women are part of peacebuilding, because, most of the time, they do not receive recognition for their work. We always want to see women taking part in official processes, such as peace negotiations. At the very minimum, we should valorise the little acts that women carry out, the

package of peace that every community is looking for.

What can women around the world learn from Cameroonian women?

Cameroonian women have proven that they are resilient. They are consistent in their demand for peaceful resolutions to conflicts and have worked for peace in such a way that no stakeholder can ignore them. They brought together a local level with the same degree of understanding and then took it to the national level. They are a key player, a voice and a force to recognise. Women around the world are unique in their own way. But every woman around the world can learn from Cameroonian women the power of sisterhood, of believing in the collective, of movement, the amplification of voices, the power of numbers and the focus of working together for the common good.

This interview was conducted by Vanessa Wagner.



Sally Mboumien
Bamenda

Sally Mboumien, together with Esther Oman and Marthe Wandou, received the German Africa Prize 2023 on behalf of the 1st National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon. She is also the founder and managing director of the organisation Common Action for Gender Development, which campaigns for the realisation of women and girls' rights to sexual and reproductive health.