

# **A Country Case Study of the Situation of Widows in the Western Highlands of Cameroon**

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## **Introduction**

The Western Highlands of Cameroon is made up of the Northwest and West provinces. It is usually called the Grassfields, and it is dominated by relatively large centralized chiefdoms. The female population in the western highlands by 2004 was estimated at 2,281,063. The main tribal groups of the region are the Tikar, Widikum, Bamieleke and the Bamoun. Among these tribes, each person belongs to both a patrilineage and a matrilineage. With the exception of the Kom and Wum ethnic groups within the Tikar tribe who practice matrilineal succession (sister's son succeeding to their uncle's estate), the patrilineal relationships are economically and politically dominant.

Within the tribes, a man as husband has certain formal duties towards his wife. He is the main breadwinner, and has the final say in all family matters. He is protector and a defender of the family. A woman's importance is measured by her husband's position and achievements in their community and in the lineage. Given this, the loss of a husband causes the widow a multiplicity of psychological, social, financial, material, and cultural pains.

The total population of the Western Highlands for year 2000, according to Cameroon National Institute of Statistics was estimated at 3,716,000. With the population annual growth rate of 2.7, the population by 2005 was estimated at 4,245,490 of which 50.1% are females and 49.9% males. Unfortunately there are no statistics to show what percentage of the female population are currently widows, although it is believed that the number of widows is greater now than in the past owing to the early death of men from HIV/AIDS.

There is also little reliable documented information on their situation that could be used to make a case for much greater government support through targeted policies and the recognition of their rights. With little quantitative and qualitative data on widows, no coherent well argued and documented case can be presented to the government, UN agencies and other international and national Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for concern and action. In order to build up a comprehensive picture of the social, cultural and economic practices triggered by widowhood, WRI commissioned the writer to provide a case study of the situation of widows in the Western Highlands of Cameroon. It is hoped that the findings of the research can be used either by widows' or women's organizations in Cameroon to begin to advocate for remedial interventions to overcome the discrimination that widows in Cameroon, in general, and the Western Highlands of Cameroon in particular, suffer. The writer used a number of data sources to provide as much quantitative and qualitative data as possible. Given the paucity of up-to-date data, the demographic estimates provided are mostly projected from the Cameroon's VIth five year economic, social and cultural development plan (1986- 1991); Cameroon statistical year book for 2000; and from a write-up by Mirabelle Karawa 2002<sup>1</sup>. The writer also consulted provincial hospital records in Bamenda and Bafoussam to see if there were documented information on the death of widows and widowers, but no specific records for widows and widowers are kept. Some medical doctors and nutritionists in the hospitals were interviewed to find out if there are differences in health and nutritional status of widows. A random sample survey of 92 women (married and unmarried), aged 15 and above, all small scale farmers was carried out in Bafanji village, Ngoketunjia Division of the NW province to evaluate some of the reported estimates. Thirty of the women were found to be widows.

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<sup>1</sup> Mirabelle Karawa, 2002, "The plight of widows and the responsibility of the church." A paper presented during the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Christian community development conference in Bamenda, North West Province,

## Demographics

From Cameroon's VIth Five Year economic, social and cultural development plan (1986-1991) the female ( $\geq 15$  years) population in the Western Highlands of Cameroon by 1991 stood at 819,500. Using Cameroon's growth rate of 3.23% per annum (then), we can estimate that by end of 2004 this was likely to have increased to 1,238,870 (29% of the Western Highlands population). Karawa estimated that about one out of every three women in the area is a widow, or **33% of the total female population over 15 years of age at one time has been a widow**. Her estimate was confirmed by a sample village survey carried out by the writer with results as stated above. This indicates that there are approximately 412, 950 women who are either currently widowed or have been widowed at some time during their life time in the region today.

In 1991, the female population under 15 years of age in the region was 689,400 (according to the VIth Five-year development plan). Using the same population growth rate of 3.23%, we can calculate that by 2004, there were 1,042,193 girls. The total female population in the area in 2004 was therefore approximately 2,281,063. This suggests that more than 18% of the total female populations in the area are widows.

Unfortunately, there are no statistics to show how many women between the ages of 15 – 59 are widows or ever have been widowed nor are statistics available for widowhood among the over 60s. Given that younger widows are likely to remarry, the older women get the greater the likelihood of widowhood. The proportion of widows in two age cohorts: 15-59, and 60+ are the only proportions that can be estimated using Cameroon's Sixth Five Year Plan. Women population 15-59 years of age in the Western Highlands in 1991 was 747,800, and using the growth rate of 3.23% per annum, that population at the end of 2004 was 1,130,479. If one out of every 3 women is a widow, then there are 376,826 widows in this age cohort in the region. In other words, **33.3% of women 15-59 years in the region are widows**.

In same thinking, women population 60 years and above in the region in 1991 was 71,700 and using the growth rate of 3.23% per annum, that population at the end of 2004 was 108,392. Using the estimate that one out of every 3 women is a widow, there are 36,131 widows in the 60+ years cohort in the region today. Put differently, **33.3% of women 60 years and above in the region are widows**.

Life expectancy for females for 1981, 1991, and 2004 was respectively 50.26 years, 57.6 years and 48.83 years; while for males within same period was 48.63, 54.54, and 47.1 years. This shows that there has been a decline in life expectancy for both females and males from 1991 to 2004. This decline is probably due to deaths from HIV/AIDS.

Widows can remarry provided the next husband is a relation of the deceased. As a woman is considered to be a wife to the entire kin group, at the death of her husband, another family member can take her as his wife. The husband's direct family has the right to arrange or approve her transfer to another member of the lineage. A widow can also decide to co-habit with a man who is not of her deceased spouse's kin group. This type of cohabitation is popularly referred to in Pidgin English as "Come We Stay" (CWS). In this case, the children or property resulting from such a relationship belong, at least traditionally, to the woman's late husband's family. Should a widow die in such cohabitation relationship, her corpse must be buried in her deceased husband's compound. It should be noted that if a married woman's bride price has been refunded to her husband's kin before his death, she is not considered a widow and as such can remarry whoever she wishes. In this situation it is her natal family who has the right to arrange and approve her remarriage or non-marriage; the family of her divorced-deceased husband has no right to arrange or approve her marriage or non-marriage. The idea of widows or widowers remarrying should be discouraged traditionally except the cause of death is well known and it is not related to HIV/AIDS and other STDs.

It is difficult to come up with mortality for widows in the various age cohorts compared to that of married women. However, **the gross mortality rate for Cameroon by 1991 was around 12.5%**. The case of the widower is different. He can remarry as soon as he wants to, but his new wife must not be from his deceased wife's family. The widower's decision to remarry or not is personal and not decided by either his or his deceased wife's family.

## Social

**Proportion of widows living in the urban and rural areas:** About 29.4% of the population of west province lives in the urban areas while 25% do so in the Northwest province. Thus the majority (over 70%) of people in the Western Highlands live in rural areas. Given the lack of statistics, we must assume that these percentages affect men, women, widows, etc. equally. We can therefore assume that the majority of widows probably live in rural areas. Since rural widows have the right to use their late husband's land and other property but cannot sell either of them, moving to town will require a widow to have some money with which to start a new life in the urban areas for herself and her dependents. There are no social restrictions on widows' geographical mobility after the obligatory mourning and cleansing period which lasts for between two to seven weeks depending on the ethnic group. However, traditional authorities can give working class widows (rural or urban) a waiver from the normal period so as to permit them return to work earlier. Widows are permitted to participate in secular public activities provided they have gone through the mourning period as described in customary rites section below. There are special modes of dressing for widows during and after the mourning period. From the day a husband dies, his wife is forbidden to wearing anything other than rags. A rope made from the bark of a fig tree is rubbed with cam wood and palm oil and tied around her waist. A staff made from bamboo is given her which she takes along wherever she goes. A small white raffia bag is hung on her left arm in which she can put her kola nuts, snuff, tobacco and drinking cup. After 2 – 7 weeks in these rags, the widow can begin to wear mourning clothes, i.e. dresses mostly white or black in color. After one year and in commemoration of the first anniversary of her husband's death, she removes all her mourning clothes and wears her normal dresses from then on.

A **widower** has no restriction on his mobility even during the mourning period. There is no compulsion on him to wear any mourning attire, and even when he wears it, he needs not respect the dress code for the required period. Tradition is not severe on him because he can remarry as soon as he wants. However, a widower who does not remarry is not stigmatized.

## Economics

Customary law does not usually make provision for a widow to have the right to inherit her late husband's property. She is considered the husband's property, hence property cannot inherit property. Rather she as property has to be inherited by her husband's next of kin. Even if a widow were allowed to inherit, witchcraft and witch hunting will make it impossible for her to enjoy and administer the inheritance. Culturally, it is a misfortune for a man to die without having a son because only a male child can inherit or have rights over the father's property; hence the widow can benefit more from what the son has inherited. It should be noted that a successor who is not the widow's son can refuse her use right over the deceased husband's property. In a polygamous setting, husbands usually share their landed property among their wives to be used as farm land. Upon the death of the husband, each widow still has user rights over the piece of land that was allocated to her by her late husband. However, the successor of her late husband can take the land for other uses or give it to her son(s) if he is not one of her sons.

Traditionally any of the sons from any of the wives can become the inheritor of the dead man's property. A widow's maintenance from her husband's immediate heir is not a right, but a privilege especially in a polygamous setting where the heir is young and is not her son. Most widows are left without support to maintain herself and her children. The inheritance rules become more complicated in those cultures where matrilineal succession is practiced, i.e. sister's son succeeding to their uncle's estate. These nephews now become the decision-makers upon inheriting their uncle's property and make life very difficult for the widow. Most often, they force the widow and her dependents out of their homes with little or nothing to live on. The widow's brother has very little responsibility for her and her sons knowing that the sons will inherit all his property upon his death. A widow, therefore, cannot inherit her husband's property movable or immovable. She can use property and administer the property if the inheritor is her son and is still young. As she is not the owner of the land, she can neither sell nor rent the land. However; she can allow other people to farm the land on a temporary basis. She gets access to land through her son and her use rights on the land in her life time if and only if the inheritor does not put the land into other uses.

She can farm the land or carry out non-permanent business activities on it. She owns all the produce from the land and can do what she likes with it. The ownership and right of disposal of housing and non agricultural productive resources is the sole responsibility of the inheritor of her husband's property who may or may not be her son in polygamous marriages. Customarily, land is a jealously preserved treasure of a family and cannot be easily given away. A widow's access to property or land depends on her having a male child or male children, because property is always shared amongst sons and not daughters. Daughters are considered future wives for other persons and cannot be given property because it would eventually be taken to another man's compound or squandered with boy friends.

**It should be noted that a few widows have obtained legal redress when they were dispossessed of their matrimonial belongings and inheritance. Most of the cases went right to the Supreme Court. This process is not only time consuming, but requires a lot of finance, which most widows cannot afford. In addition, most widows are ignorant of the laws.** The laws of inheritance from which the rights to inheritance derive, come primarily from 3 sources: the English law introduced in the former British Southern Cameroon; French law introduced into the territory in the colonial period and post independence legislation (Code Civil); and the numerous customary laws which have survived the superimposition of foreign legal cultures.

The widow has the right to keep both her sons and her daughters if she can provide for their needs and if she is not co-habiting with non relatives of the deceased husband. If she cannot provide for the children's needs, her husband's family members can decide to share the children among kinsmen who can take care of them, but this must be done with her consent. Most of the time, she is left with the children because nobody wants to take on the responsibility for their maintenance. Even if the children remain with her, she cannot betroth any of her daughters to any suitor without the consent of her husband's heir and family. Customarily a woman can neither negotiate to give her daughter in marriage nor receive the bride price. Her sons have to fend for themselves when the time comes to have a wife. A young man's father's next of kin negotiates the bride price, participates in the payment, but the money comes from the to-be husband.

Traditionally, maintenance from her husband's immediate heir is not a right but a privilege especially in a polygamous setting where the heir is young and happens not to be her son. She is abandoned to herself with her children. The above situations therefore explain why the widow may have access to use her husband's property, but can't have the right of disposal of housing and non-agricultural productive resources. The ownership and right of disposal of housing and non-agricultural productive resources is the sole responsibility of her husband's successor who may or may not be her son in polygamous marriages.

A widow's rights do not change if she is "remarried" to the late husband's kinsman. However, if she co-habits with a man other than her husband's kin, her rights do change. During the period of cohabitation, she has no right to use any of her late husband's property. For example if she were living in one of her husband's houses, she will be chased out.

Traditionally and legally, there is no law that prohibits a widow doing waged work or salary employment especially in cases where she was employed before the death of her husband. Once widowed, she will have to find some means to earn a living. Whatever income she gets from such a job or business activity, she is entitled to retain and manage the income from it. The situation of a widower is completely different. As a wife, her property is considered the husband's property. He automatically is his deceased wife's next of kin and has no restrictions in managing her property. As such, upon the death of the wife, he inherits all the wife's property movable or immovable and has the right to everything be it housing or non agricultural productive resources, and can dispose of it whenever and wherever he wishes. He has the absolute right to keep his sons and daughters, or he can send any of them to stay with any body of his choice. The heir of the late wife might be one of her children or relative (if she is childless). This successor is only symbolic since the husband owns all the wife had.

### **Household Arrangements**

The widow tends to live with her immediate family members who include her children and relatives. A widow may live in her late husband's compound until death, but can go to any other place with

the permission of her late husband's successor or family member. There are no restrictions on where a widow may live nor with whom she may live, but she cannot co-habit with a man in her late husband's compound. This is considered as a violation of the laws of the land.

Widows are considered property of the husbands' families and as such must not return to their natal homes except their possessions and rights to the use of their husband's property have been violated. Even if a widow stays in her natal home, she still pays allegiance to the late husband's family. Wherever a widow dies, her corpse must be brought back to her deceased husband's compound for burial. There are no State support networks which widows can access; however, there are few non-governmental organizations and church groups that sometimes support the widows and their children.

### **Customary Rites**

It is customary that a woman goes through special rites / practices upon the death of her husband. These widowhood practices in the Western Highlands of Cameroon constitute severe Human Rights violation, and abuses all of which compound the emotional and psychological pain at the death of a husband.

From the day a husband dies his wife is forbidden from wearing clothes, except rags. In some cultures, the widow is expected to undress before men. She is clean-shaven wherever there is hair on the body. She is not allowed to bathe; instead she is rubbed with cam wood from her head to toes. Rope made from the back of a fig tree is rubbed with cam wood and palm oil and tied around her waist. The poor woman is given a staff made from bamboo which she takes along wherever she goes. A small white raffia bag is hung on her left arm in which she can put her kola nuts, snuff and tobacco to smoke away some of her miserable thoughts. Her belongings are a taboo to touch except by other widows. She is neglected, dejected and isolated. She sleeps on plantain leaves on the floor and moves barefooted. She is not allowed to cook, but food is served to her on a plantain leaf as a plate by older widows. There are no restrictions on what a widow may eat. Her movements are restricted. On the final day of the death celebration of her deceased husband, the widow is obliged to move with her buttocks on the ground round the celebration yard. All the above described process takes three to seven weeks, after which the widow is allowed to wear mourning dress (black or white) for one year. After one year and in commemoration of the first anniversary of the husband's death, the widow removes all her mourning clothes and wears her normal dresses from then on.

These rites don't differ much by ethnic groups, but differ according to religious groups. Moslems don't go through such traditional rites because they have their own widowhood practices which ties with what the Koran stipulates. Christian couples, who form a minority, don't go through these customary rites.

**The rationales** for the widowhood practices in the Western Highlands of Cameroon are many and varied. Hardly is any death considered natural in this area. Most deaths are attributed to witchcraft and the power of witchcraft is very often attributed to women. When a man dies, society quickly accuses the wife for being the cause of the death. The society considers the ill treatment of the widow as punishment for the death of the husband and for having disobeyed the husband while he was alive. This ill treatment is also considered as a test of fidelity for the wife of the deceased since she has to stay for one year without sexual intercourse with any person. It is also viewed as a cleansing exercise. To many, it is simply a custom. Widows who have gone through these rituals feel cheated and make sure they perform this same act on their fellow sisters with exactitude, with the fear that if it was discontinued, something unexpected and unpleasant could happen to the society. So to those older in widowhood, it is an assurance of continuity.

**The widower** as well goes through customary rites upon the death of his wife. He is only clean-shaven of all hair on his body, sits on a chair and is not isolated and neglected by people, as in the case of a widow. After two weeks, a ceremony is performed, which completely ends up his widower state. He wears mourning clothes (black or white) for one year, if he likes, after which he wears his normal clothes. He can re-marry as soon as he wishes. He is also considered carrier of bad luck and this last for only two weeks. He does not have any diet restrictions. The vexing problem is that while the widow is being badly treated, the widower on the other hand is mildly treated and only for a very brief period. The widower is not isolated, restricted, nor neglected. He is permitted to shake hands with his guests, chat and laugh as he

wishes. He can return to work soon after the burial of his wife. It is unjustifiable to have a lenient practice for the man and a rigid one for the woman in similar circumstances.

### **Social Policy**

The state does not provide any welfare benefits for widows. However, if the widow's husband was a salaried worker, she **may** benefit from her husband's death benefits. For those whose husbands were not salaried workers, they do not have anything from the State as death benefits for their husbands.

There is no statistics of how many widows claim these benefits.

**The widower** on the other hand can only benefit from the wife's death from the State if she was a salaried worker.

### **Health Status**

There are no observable clear differences in the health status of widows as compared to married women. In an informal chat with some medical doctors in the provincial hospitals of Bamenda and Bafoussam, they disclosed that it was difficult to differentiate between the health status of widows and married women. Going by Mirabelle Karawa's report, widows are susceptible to a variety of health problems including the deadly disease HIV/AIDS, high blood pressure, stroke, and heart attacks. As concerns the nutritional status, there are no observable nutritional differences between widows and married women.

**The widower**, either working or none working class, has no observable health and nutritional differences compared to the married man. This is because his source of income or landed property does not change with the death of his wife. Moreover, a man might be married to many wives and if one dies, the others are there to take care of him.

### **Recommendations**

With the paucity of data on the situation of widows in the Western Highlands of Cameroon, in particular, and Cameroon in general, it is recommended that surveys and in-depth studies be carried out to find the following:

1. Proportion of total widows in under 20, 20-39, 40-59, and over 60 age cohorts
2. Mortality for widows in the various age cohorts compared to that of married women. This might involve keeping records with hospitals.
3. Proportion of widows in the various religious groupings (Muslim, Christians, animists, others)
4. Proportion of widows in the main ethnic groups,
5. Number of widows who have taken inheritance / next-of-kin cases to various legal courts and the outcomes of such cases, and
6. The modern and customary laws governing inheritance in Cameroon

It is also recommended that a workshop be organized after the submission of this report for the findings and the testimonies of widows to be presented to government officials, political leaders, traditional authorities, women associations, etc., etc. During such workshop, legal practitioners will talk on human rights in general and widows' rights in particular, citing some of the Cameroonian laws to support their discussions.

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