

## Challenges and Problems of the Rural Woman in the Armed Conflict of the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon

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**Abstract:** The armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon has greatly transformed the life of the rural woman in the armed conflict regions. The rural woman has lost her freedom and the important role she played in her society prior to this armed conflict. This study aims at examining the challenges and problems of the rural woman as a result of the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. To obtain data, the mixed research method was used as qualitative and quantitative data were collected through secondary and primary sources. The analysis of the data revealed the results that follow. The high targeted killing, torture, arbitrary arrests and kidnappings of male adolescents and male adults by armed men has made many males to migrate out of the armed conflict zone, leaving behind the rural woman with the pain of not living with her sons and husband; the rural woman is a victim of financial and material extortion by the armed men. The rarity of men in many villages in the conflict zone has forced the rural woman to carryout taboo activities such as digging of graves and burying of the dead. She lives in great fear as she is a victim of rape, is easily hit by stray bullets and the sounds of gunshots have brought adverse effects to her health. There is therefore the need for the protection of the rural woman in this armed conflict zone as she is hardly involved in the fighting but appears to be a great loser having lost many of her loved ones in the armed conflict.

**Keywords:** Anglophone regions, Amba fighters, rural woman, challenges, Ambazonia, Cameroon.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The rural woman is a very dynamic person and makes considerable contribution in the socio-economic development of her community (Ntongho, 1995). In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon called the Northwest and Southwest regions, the rural woman is mainly a farmer, mostly working alongside the rural man to produce foodstuffs. The rural woman in Cameroon is the house keeper who does most of the domestic chores such as fetching of water, child care, cooking and house cleaning (Sikod, 2007; United Nations, 2008), ensuring that the family is well taken care of. Prior to the Anglophone armed conflict in the Southwest and Northwest regions, the rural woman was a vibrant person. She lived happily and was sure of her capabilities. As mother of mankind, she was well respected. She was a peace maker in the family and in her community. According to the United Nations Organisation, women are usually committed in the search and consolidation of peace (ONU, 2017). She was an adviser and was respected. Children mostly felt more comfortable with their mothers than with their fathers. Where the rural man failed to use his authority to make his children carryout certain tasks, the rural woman

succeeded to make the children oblige with her gentle words. In villages, children could disrespect their fathers, but will hardly disrespected their mothers. With very little resources, she could provide food to all members of the household. She was almost the first to rise in the morning and almost the last to go to bed in the night, after making sure things around her had been taken care of. She was happy by the recognition given her by the rural society. When she finished her household activities, she spent the later part of the evening discussing with her children, husband and with some friends.

In the year 2017, the life of the rural woman in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon became very insecure. The rural areas had become battle grounds for a battle whose origin had little to do with the rural areas. In the year 2016, Anglophone teachers openly organised strike actions to protest the use of francophone teachers with little or no knowledge in English language to teach Anglophone students in Anglophone secondary schools. Anglophone lawyers joined the teachers in strike actions as they complained of attempts made to eradicate the English legal system of common law. Thousands of sympathisers joined the teachers and lawyers in strike

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actions in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Gunshots from the forces of law and order led to many loss of lives (Orock, 2021; CHRDA, 2019). Unable to reach a compromise on the dialogue table, lawyers' and teachers' trade unions declared sit at home on Mondays, which was generally respected. Many Anglophone leaders involved in the strikes were arrested and detained in prisons mostly in Douala and Yaounde. What followed was the pick-up of arms by many Anglophone youths called Amba Fighters, Amba boys or separatist fighters. These Amba fighters started attacking forces of law and order and the military. The Amba fighters got most of their moral, material and financial support from Anglophones in the diaspora who were asking for secession from the Republic of Cameroon and the creation of the Federal Republic of Ambazonia (Balgah & Bang, 2022; Okereke, 2018; Moinina & Ngoh, 2020).

The higher military presence in urban areas in the Anglophone regions of the Northwest and Southwest made the Amba activities in urban areas less intensified. The relatively low presence of the military in rural areas in the Anglophone regions made the rural areas the fief of Amba activities. Thus, rural areas had more Amba-military confrontations than urban areas. Balgah and Bang (2022) assert that despite the use of complex war arsenals by the military and the high killing of Amba fighters, the separatist fighters controlled extensive rural areas and main roads in the conflict zone. The Amba fighters mostly used guerrilla warfare of hit-and-run, whereby after each attack of the military, they ran into villages and into nearby bushes. The military retaliation in the villages and bushes made the civilian population to suffer great loss of lives, injuries and destruction of property. People were attacked in their homes, in roads and in their farms as the military searched for the Amba fighters. Hundreds of thousands of people abandoned villages and became internally displaced persons in other regions of Cameroon, or refugees mostly in Nigeria (Samah & Sunjo, 2021; Safotso, 2020). Six year since the armed conflict erupted in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, it was noticed that villages were highly depopulated of the rural man. There were more rural women who appeared to have been abandoned. They no longer had the characteristics they had prior to the armed conflict in 2017. They appeared greatly burdened. The observed situation of the rural women six year into the armed conflict encouraged this research. Thus, the aim of this research is to examine the challenges and problems of the rural woman as a result of the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Secondary data in this study were collected from libraries and from the internet. Through this secondary research, some qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Primary data were collected through fieldtrips using the mixed research method. Seven villages were randomly selected in the armed conflict zone for the collection of primary data. Four of these

seven villages are in the Northwest Region and three are in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. In the Northwest Region, Bambalang, Kikai Kom, Big Babanki and Bafut villages were visited for the collection of primary data. Ikata, Bafia and Nchang villages in the Southwest Region were visited for primary data. Guided interviews were mostly used to collect qualitative data. The people interviewed were women, married men, soldiers fighting Amba fighters, and secessionist fighters also called Amba Boys or Amba fighters. In all, 32 people were interviewed: 19 women, 6 men, 4 soldiers and 3 Amba fighters. The researchers conducted the interviews in all the villages except in Kikai Kom village where a native of the village assisted the researcher to conduct the interviews. The researcher could not reach Kikai Kom village because of the higher risks involved as the Amba fighters in this area were ruthless and had abducted many government workers in the area. Thus, the researcher interviewed 16 women, 5 married men and 4 soldiers. In Kikai Kom village, 3 women and 1 man were interviewed by a native who assisted the researcher. A worker with a Non-governmental Organisation working in the conflict area also assisted the researcher to administer the interviews to the 3 Amba fighters. Quantitative data were mostly collected using questionnaires. A total of 91 questionnaires were distributed to 63 women and 28 men. The researcher received 86 filled questionnaires, giving a 94.5% realisation rate. Due to the insecurity in the selected villages, the researcher used the random sampling method to select 9 women and 4 men per village for the distribution of questionnaires. Here, the same native of Kikai Kom village assisted the researcher to administer the questionnaires in this village.

Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis methods. Content analysis method involved the examination of qualitative data obtained from the field and from documentary research leading to reliable conclusions drawn. Thematic analysis involved the study of data collected through interviews that led to generation of patterns from which themes were drawn. Quantitative data collected in this research were analysed using the cross-tabulation method. Tables showing the relationship between two or more variables were used to analyse related quantities of data obtained in this study. The crosstabs include frequency tables showing opposing variables arranged in rolls and columns. Descriptive statistical methods such as arithmetic mean, range, frequencies and percentages made up part of this cross tabulation analysis.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Women are partly the backbone of agriculture in rural areas. Njobe (2015) claims that women in Africa make great contributions in agriculture as they are responsible for about 50% farming labour force. This author continues to claim that women in Sub-Saharan Africa produce from 60% to 80% of Africa's food. Njobe is in line with Walker (1990) who declare that women

were responsible for 70% of staple food production in Africa. Concerning Cameroon, Njikam *et al.*, (2021, as cited in Hawke, n.d) advance that rural women in Cameroon accounted for about 80% of food crop productivity. Food crop farming is more of a feminine activity as women produced about 90% of food crops in Cameroon (Ntongho, 1995). According to Ntongho, women focus on food crop farming in order to create an identity. Tambi *et al.*, (2017), Guenther and Molongua ((2014) show that women are basically responsible for the cultivation of staple food, making great contribution to ensure food security.

The armed conflict in the Southwest and Northwest regions, otherwise commonly called the Anglophone regions of Cameroon has caused great negative effects on agriculture. Chung (2020) and Ngangchi *et al.*, (2019) declare that the armed conflict has negatively affected the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) as most of its labourers has escaped out of the capitalist plantation areas to other areas for their safety due to recurrent attacks from the Amba separatist fighters. This according to these authors has led to significant drop in its palm oil, rubber and banana annual outputs. The reduction in agricultural outputs has created a great vulnerability to food supply to the local population in the conflict regions. The conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions is plagued with numerous long periods of restriction of movement of the local population, hindering farmers to cultivate crops, harvest crops or evacuate the crops from their farms (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2020). Piyinchu (n.d) declare that the armed conflict has created food insecurity to over a million people in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

Armed conflicts are generally masterminded by men. Women are generally caught in the armed conflict web as victims of the conflict and generally not as active participants in the conflicts. Coulter *et al.*, (2008) narrate that women are generally considered passive in armed conflicts as they are considered as live givers and not live takers. These authors however show that few women take active part in armed conflicts. Siddiqui (2015) explain that although women do not take active front role in fighting during armed conflicts, they can play active role in the peace process as they know the importance of peace during armed conflicts and can actively take part in grass-root peace building processes. According to the Lindsey (2015); Braithwaite and Ruiz (2018) women are hardly active in armed conflicts though some women are fighters in militia groups. To these authors, many women who become fighters do not join voluntarily but are coerced into armed groups against their will. Recruiters of female fighters who are mostly men use threats to force women to join the armed groups. Kaufman and Williams (2013) support the fact that women are generally passive in armed conflicts as they play very passive roles such as peace activism and silent vigils. However, some women take active parts in armed

conflicts in militia groups where they play the role of suicide bombers and rebel fighters. International Crisis Group (2022) claims that although many women do not actively take part in the fighting, many of them actively validate the decisions of their husbands and sons joining the separatist fighters in the Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, giving boost to the fighters combatting Cameroon's military.

Bennoune (2007) shows that there exists international law that protects women, especially mothers and pregnant women during armed conflicts. These pregnant women and mothers in maternities during armed conflicts are equal to the sick and the wounded and are therefore highly protected by international law and they should not be attacked no matter the circumstances. This author goes further to show that international law grants pregnant women and mothers with children below 7 years of age safety zones, especially for their evacuation to zones of security. Willis *et al.*, (2019) show that international law for the protection of women, especially pregnant women and mothers have not been respected in the armed conflict in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon as many pregnant women have been attacked and killed even in health facilities where female nurses and pregnant women have been summarily killed by fighters. These authors explain that many female civilians have been physically assaulted and raped.

Kaze (2021) explains that the Cameroon's Anglophone armed conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions has caused thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). These IDPs are mostly displaced from villages to nearby villages and towns in the West Region of Cameroon. This author shows that these internal displaced persons are faced with multiple difficulties and are unable to provide their basic needs, pushing the girls to engage in prostitution and to work as house helps, while the boys easily become commercial motorbike riders. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (2021), the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon in less than one year caused the internal displacement of over 160,000 people. In addition, hundreds of thousand people from the conflict area has migrated into Nigeria. These IDPs faced many humanitarian challenges, especially food shortage.

Despite the elaborate literature on armed conflicts in general and on the causes and effects of the Anglophone conflict, there is a research vacuum on the struggles of the rural woman in the conflict zone in the two Anglophone regions. Thus, this research will focus on the different challenges and problems of the rural woman in the conflict zone of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon as she struggles to survive in an area destroyed by armed conflict.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the start of the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon between the separatist fighters called Amba fighters on one hand and the military on the other hand, the rural women has stood as a major victim of the armed conflict. These women in villages in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon continue to suffer many problems and challenges. Many of these women have been abandoned in the armed conflict regions by their loved ones. Most of these women face great difficulties in carryout their agricultural activities. They face challenges in evacuating their farm produce and to market these farm outputs. They have difficulties accessing healthcare in the conflict zone and they have taken over taboo activities that were performed mostly by the men.

### 4.1 A Woman Mostly Abandoned by her Loved Ones

It was discovered in this study that most of the Amba fighters are males. Females hardly join the separatist groups as Amba fighters. The rural women claimed that those Amba fighters are their sons and sometimes their husbands. These sons and husbands have joined the separatist fighters seeking secession from the Republic of Cameroon without seeking the opinions of their mothers and wives. These male fighters have simply abandoned their mothers and wives to join the armed militia group. Majority of rural women whose sons or husbands have joined the separatist fighters claimed that they were not aware of their sons or husbands intentions to join the separatist fighters. Most of these women claimed that they would have tried to persuade their sons and husbands from not joining the Amba fighters if they were aware prior to their sons and husbands joining the fighters. Table 1 below illustrates the opinions of women whose sons and husband abandoned them and joined the separatist fighters.

**Table 1: Opinions of rural women whose sons and husbands abandoned them and joined the separatist fighters**

village	N° of women	N° of sons/husband that joined the militia	N° of women aware of sons/husbands' decision to join
Bambalang	09	03	00
Kikai Kom	08	02	01
Big Babanki	09	02	00
Bafut	08	04	02
Ikata	09	03	00
Bafia	09	01	00
Nchang	09	02	01
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>23.5</b>

Source: fieldwork

From Table 1, only 23.5% of rural women were aware of their husbands' and sons' decisions to join the Amba fighters. This implies that majority of these fighters, that is, 76.5% of these separatist fighters abandoned their mothers and wives without their knowledge before joining the separatist armed fighters. These women claim to have lived in great pain when they discovered that their loved ones had abandoned them to join the Anglophone separatist fighters. Many of these women still claim to suffer the pain of this abandonment as their sons or husbands do not communicate with them till date. Some of the women claim that they do not have any information as to the whereabouts of their sons or husbands, not knowing if they are alive or dead. Interview granted to some Amba fighters as to the reasons why many of them have abandoned their mothers without any contact or communication reveal that the reason why the Amba fighters have cut off communication and contact with their mothers and other relatives is strategic, mainly to protect these mothers and relatives. These Amba fighters claim that state soldiers always expect them to create contacts with their loved ones in villages and may visit them from time to time. The Amba fighters claim that they are easily killed by the military when they visit their relatives in the villages and

in many cases, their relatives are targeted and even killed by the military for having sons or brothers in the separatist armed groups. Thus, to protect their mothers and wives especially, they take the very difficult measure to cut off ties.

As earlier mentioned, Amba fighters were mostly composed of males; principally adolescents and young adults. These armed fighters cannot be easily identified as they do not have specific uniforms. They dress ordinarily and mingle with the local population. Certainly, they use this is a strategy to remain incognito and easily surprise state soldiers at any time. Conscious of this Amba fighting tactic, every male adolescents and adults, especially the young adults is a potential Amba fighter in the eyes of the military. This made many state soldiers to arrest, torture, shot at and kill any suspected male adolescent and male adults they come across. Willis *et al.*, (2019) support the claim that male adults and the civilian population in general have suffered several human right abuses such as extra-judicial and unlawful killings, arbitrary and illegal detention, torture and humiliation. Brun (2022) goes further to account for the high male adult abandonment of the conflict zone, claiming these male adults had to escape from the

conflict zone as they suffered 93% of beatings, 95% of torture, 96% of illegal imprisonment, 92% of extra judiciary killing and 78% kidnapping. Through this suspicion, many male adolescents and young male adults were targeted and killed by the military. Thus, every male adolescent and adult considered himself a target of the military. This caused many male adolescents and adults to abandon their mothers in the villages and fled out of the conflict zone for safety. Thus, many rural women have been abandoned in the villages by their sons and husbands who have fled out of the conflict regions. Most of the rural women whose sons and husbands have fled the villages to the Francophone regions of Cameroon declared that they communicate with their sons and husbands far off the conflict area but confirmed that the pain of leaving without their children or husbands is enormous for them to bear. However, a small number of rural women making 81.2% declared that they have never communicated with their sons since these sons abandoned them. These women regret the existence of the armed conflict as it has brought untold sufferings to them. An interview granted to a 52 year old rural woman in Bambilang village led to the following declaration.

My only son who is supposed to be 23 years old was living in the family house here in the village. He was never an Amba fighter but soldiers came to my house one night looking for him. They claimed he was an Amba. Fortunately, he was not in the house that night. He got news of the attempted arrest and hid himself at his uncle's house in nearby Bamunka village. The soldiers came again twice looking for him. We were all beaten and most of my things in the house were destroyed. My son later sent words to me that he was relocating to the West Region out of the conflict zone. Unfortunately, it is four years today and nobody has ever heard from him. We do not know if he is alive or dead. The pain of not being with him or hearing from him is killing me slowly. I continue to pray to our ancestors that he should be alive somewhere.

Many male adults have abandoned their wives and mothers in the villages not only because they were targeted by the military as some of them were targeted by the Amba fighters (Brun, 2022). Amba fighters call these males they target 'blacklegs' or 'enablers' meaning they are traitors to the secessionist course. Anyone who have any contact with a state soldier, who do not respect their instructions, who continue to work in government institutions, especially teachers of public schools are considered as traitors and called 'Blacklegs' or 'enablers'. Such persons are mostly young men who are

sometimes shot and killed, kidnapped for ransom and sometimes tortured by the separatist fighters. This has pushed many accused men to abandon their wives and mothers and fled their villages.

#### **4.2 Difficulties in Carrying Out Their Daily Activities**

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon where the armed conflict is ongoing, the main economic activity of the rural woman is peasant farming. This peasant farming is jointly carried out by members of a family. There is a form of division of labour. The males mostly do the clearing of the bushes and the felling of trees during land preparation for farming. Males do the digging when holes are needed to plant certain crops. The females mostly do the tilling of the soil before seeds are planted. Females also dominate weeding. Heavy loads are mostly transported by males.

In most villages where the armed conflicts is still deadly, many males cannot easily carryout farming activities. This is because many males are easy targets of the military and the Amba fighters. In areas where the farms are along routes easily used by the military or Amba fighters, the males are mostly afraid to use these routes. A total of 32% of men have abandoned at least one of their farms completely in areas where the armed fighting is so deadly. Another 44% of men have abandoned some of their farms to their wives due to high risks of harassment or death from the Amba fighters or the military. These men have abandoned the farms to the rural women who are often less targeted by soldiers and Amba fighters. The abandonment of most farming activities to the rural women by the men has made farming so tedious for the women. They are the ones who use machetes to clear the farms of the bushes, they till the soil and dig holes for planting. They do the planting, weeding, harvesting and transportation of the crops from the farms to their home or to the market. This has made farming to be so laborious to the rural woman in the armed conflict zone.

The rural women face challenges accessing their farms. Without their sons and husbands to protect them, they have been exposed to many forms of harassments and extortions from the armed men. They claim state soldiers and Amba fighters sometimes seize their money or crops and sometimes beat them. They also claim Amba soldiers sometimes kidnap them for ransom; a point supported by the International Peace Institute (Cummings, 2018). Table 2 below illustrates these harassment suffered by the rural woman in the armed conflict zone.

**Table 2: Rural women in the armed conflict zone and harassments in their farms and on their ways to and from farms**

Villages	N° of women	Forms of harassment from armed men and number of women involved			
		Extortion of money	Extortion of crops	Kidnapped for ransom	Beaten
Bambalang	09	07	05	02	02
Kikai Kom	08	05	04	01	03
Big Babanki	09	08	06	00	03
Bafut	08	07	05	02	01
Ikata	09	06	03	00	01
Bafia	09	07	05	01	02
Nchang	09	06	04	02	01
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>08</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>75.4</b>	<b>52.5</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>21.3</b>

Source: Fieldwork data

From Table 2, 75.4% of rural women have had their money extorted by Amba fighters and by government forces. These women throw more accusation on Amba fighters for being the major money extortionists. They claim that these armed fighters used to meet them either on the roads or in their farms and force them to make financial contributions to support the armed struggle. In some villages, the women are forced to pay stated amounts of money to the Amba fighters before they are allowed to go about their daily activities. Receipts are given upon payment of these moneys so that those who have paid are not harassed for a stated period of time. In Big Babanki, women staged a protest march against the Amba fighters for imposing taxes on them. The Amba fighter retaliated and abducted several rural women. These women were severely beaten by the Amba fighters for daring to oppose the imposed tax. Some of the women received gunshots on their legs and sustained bullet wounds. Others received injuries from the beating they got. In other villages, the Amba fighters request for 'free-will' donations from these rural women as they pass through their control posts. Though the Amba fighters term it free will donation, the women declared that the Amba fighter molest people who fail to contribute in the 'free will' donation.

Many women in villages of the Northwest and Southwest regions where the armed conflict is ongoing complained that armed men used to extort crops from them. These women accused mostly the Amba fighters as those who forcefully seize foodstuffs from the rural women. They claimed that Amba fighters sometimes meet them in their farms and harvest their crops. Sometimes, the women arrive their farms and discover that their crops have been harvested by unknown persons. They also claimed that Amba fighters have seized crops from many of them as they transport these crops from their farms to their homes. Actually, 52.5% of rural women claimed to have been victims of crop extortion by armed men. Some of the rural women also accused soldiers of extorting crops from them. In Nchang village in Manyu Division of the Southwest Region, some women accused soldiers of seizing hundreds of tubers of yams from them which the soldier loaded in their military trucks and carried away. In the cocoa

growing villages of the Southwest Region, women accused the military of extorting dry cocoa beans from the farmers. They claimed that once the soldiers arrive the village, they sometimes fire several gunshots into the sky and make villagers think that there is a gun battle in the villages between the Amba fighters and the military. The villagers become scared, they abandon everything behind and run into nearby farms and bushes for safety. This gives the soldiers enough time to load bags of cocoa beans into their military trucks and take off.

Rural women in the armed conflict Anglophone regions of Cameroon are also victims of kidnapping. Armed men kidnap many of these women and take them into distant areas in the bushes where they contact relatives of these women, asking for ransoms before they are released. According to these women, those who kidnap them claim to be Amba fighters and they justify their actions on several accusations labelled against these women. Some are accused of being 'blacklegs' or 'enablers' to the secessionist struggle. These supposed Amba fighters accuse some of these women of having their children serving in the Cameroon military, or working for the Cameroon government against the secessionist movement. Since the Amba fighters cannot get hold of the children of these women, they kidnap their mothers and demand huge amounts of money as ransoms before the women are released. Rural women who have rich or well-to-do children or relatives out of the conflict zone, especially in the diaspora are good targets for kidnapping. These kidnappers know that the rich children or relatives of these women will pay whatever amount they request for their mothers or sisters to be released. In this study, 13.1% of rural women had been kidnapped and ransom paid before they were released.

According to interviews granted to three Amba fighters, they refuted claims that Amba fighters kidnap women in particular and the civilian population in general for ransom. All Amba fighters interviewed claimed that anyone can claim to be an Amba fighter. They accused thieves and soldiers for perpetrating most of the kidnapping of civilians in order to make financial gains from the struggle and blackmail Amba fighters. The Amba fighters declared that true Amba fighters

sometimes arrest women and other persons for questioning when complaints are laid against them. They claimed if proven not guilty, the women or whoever is released without paying any money. Notwithstanding, it is clear that the rural women is kidnapped for ransom in the armed conflict zone whether by Amba fighters, disguised military personnel or thieves. This phenomenon is highly carried out because of the security chaos caused by the armed conflict as kidnapping was almost unheard of before the armed conflict.

A challenge faced by the rural woman in the armed conflict zone is that of often being beaten both by soldiers and by Amba fighters. Women in this study accused Amba fighters and soldiers of sometimes severely beating them. All rural women who were kidnapped for ransom declared that the Amba Fighters severely beat every one they kidnapped to urge them persuade their family members during telephone calls to quickly provide the ransoms requested by the Amba fighters. Many of these women declared that they were admitted in hospitals from the beating they received in Amba captivity once they were released by the Amba fighters. Some other women declared that at the start of the armed conflict, they were beaten by the Amba fighters for not being able to sing the Ambazonian anthem as the Amba fighters expected everyone to be able to sing the anthem. Failure to sing the anthem was considered as a crime against Ambazonia and was punishable by public beaten. Thus, many women who could not sing this anthem were beaten by separatist fighters. Military personnel were also accused of beating the rural women. According to the women, whenever soldiers were killed by Amba fighters, their colleagues retaliated on the civilian population, beating and even killing many people. Thus, many women were beaten by soldiers in retaliation of the loss of their colleagues killed by Amba fighters. The women who suffered beating due to the armed conflict made up 21.3% of rural women.

### 4.3 The Rural Woman Faced by Many Health Challenges

The rural woman in the armed conflict zones of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon is faced by many health challenges. They are faced with the problems of limited health facilities, difficulties in evacuating the sick to health facilities, disposal of dead bodies of people killed in the armed conflict and giving of assistance to the wounded.

In most of the villages in the conflict zone, health facilities have suffered arson attacks among other forms of destruction. Several hospitals and health centres have been burnt or brutalised in the armed conflict. According to HRW (2022), the military looted and destroyed health facilities in the Northwest Region between April and June 2022, precisely in areas such as Belo and Chomba. Adepoju (2019) also reports of arson attack perpetrated by armed men in a hospital in Kumba, Southwest Region that caused destruction of hospital

facilities and the death of four patients. Saidu *et al.*, (2021) reveal that the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon has led to the destruction of 26 health facilities and caused the death of 11 medical personnel by February 2021. The many attacks on health facilities in the conflict region led to the death of several health personnel in villages. The armed conflict zone has become insecure to healthcare workers who are targeted by the military as they are accused to providing treatment to the separatist fighters. Many village health facilities and their healthcare personnel are easily caught in crossfire between Amba fighters and the military causing many to loss their lives. VOA (2018) reported that many health workers have deserted health facilities and relocated out of the conflict zone to seek safety. Many health facilities in rural areas have been rendered useless as most equipment have been destroyed, building burnt and most medicals personal have fled the conflict zone.

The destruction of healthcare facilities in villages and the deserting of the villages by healthcare workers pose a major healthcare challenge to the rural woman in the armed conflict area of the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Many of these women who become sick cannot be treated in medicals facilities of by healthcare workers. Majority of the rural women, that is, 68.9% turn to traditional healers for treatment when they or their children become sick. According to these women, it is also very challenging to receive the services of traditional doctor as they have abandoned the villages into the bushes. This is because most of these traditional healers are accused by the military of treating the Amba fighters and also preparing protective charms used by the Amba fighters against the military. Thus, many rural women have to cover long distances into the bushes to be treated by the traditional doctors. Some of the rural women have to cover long distances, to nearby towns and cities to be treated in hospitals that are functional since towns and cities are more secure than the villages. The long distance covered by the rural women to obtain healthcare services expose her to more risks as she has to pass across checkpoints mounted by Amba fighters and the military to reach the healthcare units. In her ill-health, she runs the risk of being caught in crossfire due to gunshot exchanges between Amba fighters and the military.

Another health challenge faced by the rural women is the transportation of patients with bullet wounds to the hospitals. The men mostly avoid transporting people attained with bullet wounds to the hospitals because they are usually killed when they come across the military. This according to the men is because the military considers all males with bullet wounds as Amba fighters who have been wounded in battle. Thus, any male transporting the wounded man is labelled an Amba colleague transporting his wounded colleague to seek treatment. Therefore, most wounded persons with bullet wounds, both males and females are abandoned to the rural women. These women mostly use stretchers

made out of sticks to transport these wounded persons on foot over long distances due to inaccessible roads. These patients are transported on foot until an area where motorbikes or cars can be used.

In most of the villages where the armed conflict is intense, most male adolescents and adults have fled out of the areas. Whenever a suspected or known Amba fighter is killed by the military, other Amba fighters or the other male civilians in the villages do not approach the corpse. This is because the soldiers who killed the supposed Amba fighter sometimes hide in the vicinity waiting to kill other Amba fighters who attempt to remove the corpse. Aware of this military tactic, the corpse is left in the area for a long time, sometimes for days. When it begins to smell, posing a health risk to the villagers, the rural women gather courage and remove the corpse at the detriment of their health, to a burial ground. In the absence of the men, these women dig a grave and bury the corpse. Bang and Balgah (2022) support the fact that the armed conflict has made women to carry out taboo functions of burying the dead and performing burial rites as the men who are supposed to perform these functions have fled their villages for safety or have become Amba fighters.

#### 4.4 A Woman Living in Great Fear

One of the greatest challenges that the rural woman in the armed conflict zone of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon faces is that of permanent fear and its related health effects. Just the sound of a gunshot is enough to create great uncontrollable fear. All people sampled in this study affirmed that they go through unimaginable fear in the villages where they live. The fear in the armed conflict zone accounted for 500,000 internally displaced persons in Cameroon from the armed conflict zone and 40,000 refugees in neighbouring Nigeria ("Cameroon Anglophone Crisis," n.d.). Bang and Balgah (2022) declared that fear had increased the number of internally displaced persons in Cameroon to over 900,000 in the year 2022. In the field, 38.8% of the rural women sampled declared that fear made them to abandon their villages and moved out of the conflict zone but their inability to obtain basic means of subsistence in their new localities obliged them to return to their villages. Another fraction of the rural women, that is, 66.3% declared that if they have the means to afford their needs out of the armed conflict zone, they will move out of their villages and live out of the conflict zone because of the great fear they go through in the conflict zone. Rural women categorised the fear they go through into fear of sexual harassment, fear of death or injury, and fear of property destruction.

The fear of sexual harassment is a serious problem that young women and girls go through in the villages of the armed conflict zone. The women are aware of the fact that armed men have raped many women in their villages. Thus, they live in fear of

becoming victims of rape and struggle not to come in confrontation with armed men, especially in the night. Any news of a possibly military attack in the villages sends these women running into farms and bushes. They sometimes spend many days in the bushes until they are assured of the withdrawal of the soldiers before they can return to their villages.

The fear of death or injury is the most dreaded problem suffered by these women. These women claimed to see civilians killed arbitrarily almost every day either by the Amba fighters or by the military. They know they can be the next victims, thus the fear. Many people have been killed by stray bullets fired by armed men. Thus, these women know that whenever there are gunshots, their lives are at risk. Many women have also been caught in crossfire between Amba fighters and the military. These women were going through their daily activities and suddenly the shooting started. Many people have been struck by bullets from such crossfires. There is high number of targeted killings in the conflict area. Many people have been targeted and killed both by Amba fighters and by the military. The rural woman is quite aware of popular cases of forceful disappearance of about 17 of the about 40 motorbike riders arrested in Ndop on April 24, 2022; of 4 women and five men killed by soldiers in Missong village on June 1, 2022 (HRW, 2023) and the massacre of about 21 civilians by government forces in Ngarbuh, Northwest Region of Cameroon. The women complained that many of the targeted killings are the results of scores settling. These rural women explained that to cause the killing of a person, his or her enemy can simply report that person to the Amba fighters, claiming he or she is a 'blackleg' or an 'enabler', meaning he or she is helping the military or the Cameroon government to attack and kill the Amba fighters. With such information, many people have been killed by the Amba fighters, without any investigation. On the other hand, the rural women also explained that people settle scores with their enemies by reporting them to the military of being Amba fighters, parents of Amba fighters or supporters of Amba fighters. Through such accusation, many people have been eliminated by soldiers. These settling of scores create much fear in the rural women.

Another category of fear undergone by rural women is the fear of property destruction. The most common property destroyed in the armed conflict are houses, mostly destroyed through torching or arson attacks. In this study, 11.3% of rural women claimed that their houses have been torched. There are several reports of civilian houses burnt by government forces in the armed conflict zone. HRW (2023) narrated that government forces burnt down 12 homes in Belo, Northwest Region on June 11, 2022. According to the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, 206 villages had been torched by April 2019. With the awareness that both Amba fighters and government forces are known to use the burning of houses as a



strategy to cause pain in the area, these rural women live in fear of losing their houses and even their lives to fire.

To the rural women, the permanent fear they undergo since the start of the armed conflict has many side effects on them. Many of these women claimed to have passed out many times due to fear when there was heavy shooting of guns in their villages. In this study, 70.5% of these women declared that they have urinated on their dresses at least once during serious gun battle between the Amba fighters and the military around their vicinity. They claimed that serious gunshots have caused many aged persons in the villages to collapsed and die. A total of 36.1% of rural women claimed to have developed palpitation because of panic caused by gunshots in particular and anxiety in general.

#### 4.5 The Rural Women Faced with the Challenge of Seeking Peace

Most of the rural women in the Northwest and Southwest regions are against this armed conflict and wish that it came to an end. These women declare that they have undertaken several measures to seek the return to peace in Cameroon in general and in the two Anglophone regions in particular. However difficult the challenge to bring peace in the Southwest and Northwest regions appears, these rural women have and are contributing their share to seek the return to normalcy. It should be noted that women in general are usually committed in the search and consolidation of peace (ONU, 2017).

In the domain of seeking spiritual resolution to the armed conflict, 93.4% of rural women claimed to have carried out many spiritual interventions to their ancestors, their gods and to God almighty for the end of the armed conflict. Many Christian women claimed to have taken part in many special church services to pray for God's intervention to end the conflict. Other believers of traditional religion claimed to have evoked the intervention of their ancestors and gods for a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict.

Many rural women, that is, 78.7% in the Northwest and Southwest regions recognise themselves as Cameroonians and not as Ambazonians. They regret the fact that a misunderstanding among children of the same fatherland cannot be peacefully resolved. These women called on the president of the Cameroon to call his children who have picked up arms due to frustration and talk to them as a father does to his children for this conflict to come to an end. Only 21.3% of rural women do not identify themselves as Cameroonians, as they claim to be Abazonians. However, they claimed to be praying for the end of the fighting.

A total of 45.9% of rural women made known that they have discouraged their sons from joining the Amba boys or Amba fighters. Some of these women claimed that they had to persuade their sons to relocate

out of the conflict area in order to prevent them from joining the separatist fighters. Rural women have also struggled to persuade some Amba fighters to abandon fighting. A total of 26.2% of rural women declared that they have had talks with some Amba fighters, especially relatives, persuading them to drop their weapons and embrace peace. However, it can be deduced that some of these women persuade their relatives to drop their weapons for fear of them being killed and not necessarily for the sake of a peaceful end of the conflict. International Crisis Group (2022) supports the role played by rural women as peace crusaders persuading Amba fighters to drop weapons and embrace peace.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research was conducted on the premise that the rural woman in the armed conflict regions of the Northwest and Southwest was going through great difficulties as a result of the conflict. Results of this study show that there are many rural women whose children and even husbands have joined the separatist fighters, while others have abandoned them and relocated out of the conflict zone. Thus, the rural woman has greatly been abandoned by her loved ones. The rural woman encounters great difficulties carrying out her daily activities, especially farming as she is harassed both by the Amba fighters and by the military. Money and foodstuffs are extorted from this woman by armed fighters. The rural woman is now carrying out many taboo activities like digging of graves and burying of the dead in many villages as most of the men have escaped to areas of safety. The abandoned rural women live in great fear as she is usually a victim of rape, a victim of torture and even targeted killing. Despite all these problems, the rural woman has still taken the challenge to preach peace in order to see an end to the conflict and spare herself the sufferings. Unfortunately it is difficult to understand why all efforts made by different stakeholders and peace crusaders to bring this war to an end have failed. With the problems faced by the civilian population in general and the rural woman in particular in the armed conflict zone of the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon, there is dire need for the fighting parties to avoid targeting civilian population in these two Anglophone regions. All people who are not directly taking part in the fighting must be protected by the two warring groups. The government of Cameroon, the Amba fighters and international partners of Cameroon should mobilise forces to put an end to this war for life to return to normalcy to the rural woman in particular and the population in general.

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