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Submission on the Rights of Women in the Republic of Cameroon
Prepared by
The Advocates for Human Rights
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status
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I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. **The Advocates for Human Rights** (The Advocates) is a non-governmental organization established in 1983 that seeks to implement international human rights standards to promote civil society and reinforce the rule of law. The Advocates conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publications. The Advocates is committed to ensuring human rights protection for women around the world.

4. This submission addresses Cameroon’s compliance with its obligations in the context of women’s rights to and access to education.

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A. *Scope of International Obligations*

5. Cameroon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on August 23, 1994 (hereafter the “Convention”).¹ Women’s right to education is covered by Article 10 of the Convention.² Cameroon acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women on January 7, 2005, which allows individuals and groups to report to the Committee Cameroon’s violations of Convention rights.³

6. Article 10 of the Convention requires Cameroon to “take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights with men in the

¹ Signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women , available at http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

² The Convention of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Article 10 (entered into force 1981), available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

³ Ratifications, Accessions, and Successions to the Optional Protocol, available at http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8-b&chapter=4&lang=en (last visited 14 Nov. 2013). See also The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/text.htm> (last visited 13 Nov. 2013).

field of education.”⁴ This includes providing “the same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas”, which applies to all levels of education and vocational training.⁵ Women must have access to the same curricula, examinations, qualified teachers and schools with the same quality of facilities and equipment.⁶ Cameroon must take all measures to provide women with equal opportunities for scholarships and study grants, as well as access to continuing education, including adult literacy programs.⁷ Cameroon agreed under the Convention to take all measures to reduce female dropout rates and organize programs for girls and women who left school prematurely.⁸

B. Domestic Legislative Framework

7. Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 sets out the general legal framework of education in Cameroon, which guarantees a child’s right to education and states that primary school is free and mandated.⁹

III. COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

8. A 2012 study published by the Cameroonian government found that for every 100 boys enrolled in school, only 85 girls attend.¹⁰ The gender disparity is even more pronounced in certain areas of the country. In the poverty-stricken Far North Region, only 69% of girls attend school versus 98% of boys.¹¹ In communities bordering the Sahara desert, only 17% of girls are enrolled.¹² Even though primary education is mandated in Cameroon, only 46% of women and girls in Cameroon have completed primary education.¹³ As of 2012, only 22% of adult women had graduated from secondary school, compared to 35% of adult men.¹⁴ The adult literacy rate is 64.8% for women and 78.3% for men.¹⁵ The disparity between genders in their education is

⁴ The Convention of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Article 10 (entered into force 1981), *available at* <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Article 10(a).

⁶ *Ibid.*, Article 10(b).

⁷ *Ibid.*, Article 10(d), (e).

⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 10(f).

⁹ Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998, d’orientation de l’education au Cameroun, *available at* <http://www.axl.cefam.ulaval.ca/afrique/cameroun-loi-1998.htm> (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

¹⁰ Cameroon’s Girls Face Educational Challenges (7 Nov. 2013), *available at* <http://www.openequalfree.org/girl-power/camerouns-girls-face-educational-challenges> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, “Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report”, *available at* <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dld=154335&year=2010> (last visited 24 Oct. 2013).

¹⁴ See Cameroon Human Development Report 2013, *available at* <http://hdrstats.undp.org/images/explanations/CMR.pdf> (last visited 14 Nov. 2013).

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. (2009) The World Factbook. Retrieved March 22, 2009, *available at* <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cm.html> (last visited 9 Dec. 2013).

largely a result of barriers women face, including poverty, pregnancy, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and cultural and religious traditions.¹⁶

9. Poverty is a significant barrier to women's access to education. Even though schooling is mandatory through the age of 14,¹⁷ parents must pay uniform and book fees, and submit birth certificates and entrance examinations, which cost money.¹⁸ Families will often choose to send their male children to school over their female children if they cannot afford to send all of their children to school because tradition dictates that a Cameroonian parent's priority goes first to the sons' education.¹⁹ Girls are considered more useful at home, where they do all the housework, prepare food, and look after their younger siblings.²⁰ Rural families commonly rely on the women in the family to work in order to make ends meet.²¹ In a 2009 study of 36 Cameroonian women, some women stated they knew their parents did not have money for them to complete their schooling, so they reactively shaped their aspirations to comply with their economic reality, such as desiring to be a seamstress rather than to achieve professional status.²² Since the Muslim religion of many Cameroonians allows men to practice polygamy, it is not unusual to find a household with anywhere from six to twenty children and education for all the children of a Cameroon family is, for many, impossible.²³

10. In connection with poverty, familial illnesses or death often put families over the edge financially and parents struggle to meet their children's basic needs and send them to school.²⁴ When parents grow ill and incapacitated, their diminished work capacity can directly impact

¹⁶ See United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, "Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report", available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=154335&year=2010> (last visited 24 Oct. 2013).

¹⁷ Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998, d'orientation de l'education au Cameroun, available at <http://www.axl.cefam.ulaval.ca/afrique/cameroun-loi-1998.htm> (last visited 9 Dec. 2013).

¹⁸ See United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, "Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report", available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=154335&year=2010> (last visited 24 Oct. 2013).

¹⁹ Young Women and Education in Tibati, Cameroon, West Africa: A Letter from a Peace Corps Volunteer, World History Connected (2004), available at <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.1/don.html> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²⁰ John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, "When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children", Journal of International Women's Studies, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jjws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²¹ An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon, Journal of International Women's Studies, 8:1 (Nov. 2006), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1355&context=jjws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²² John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, "When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children", Journal of International Women's Studies, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jjws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²³ Young Women and Education in Tibati, Cameroon, West Africa: A Letter from a Peace Corps Volunteer, World History Connected (2004), available at <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.1/don.html> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

²⁴ John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, "When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children", Journal of International Women's Studies, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jjws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

girls' education.²⁵ For example, a Cameroonian woman described how illness diverted her life's direction: "I wanted to be a teacher as a little girl, but in class six all my hopes changed; my father fell ill and there was no money, no one to pay for my education."²⁶ Death and illness in the family is very common in rural Cameroon. In a 2009 study of Cameroonian women, 14 (39%) of the respondents had lost at least 1 parent during childhood, and 6 (17%) of these respondents experienced the death of both of their parents. One respondent in the study was age 17 when her father died and she could not complete the very last stretch of secondary school.²⁷

11. Early or unplanned pregnancy is another obstacle to girls' education. Many girls must forgo their education because they become pregnant. Girls who become pregnant are often not given the option or are not encouraged to return to school following their delivery.²⁸ Based on the traditional roles discussed above for women, returning to school is not viewed as important for these girls.²⁹ For example, a Cameroonian girl who became pregnant told her father that she wanted to return to school, but he told her there was not enough money to send all four of his children to school. However, the girl stated that the family financial situation had not changed from what it was prior to her becoming pregnant and she "ha[d] the feeling that my father was not interested in sending me back to school."³⁰ A lawyer and social worker with experience in working with women and girls confirms that a Cameroonian girl who becomes pregnant is likely to receive disapproving social pressure throughout her entire pregnancy.³¹ Often parents will withdraw the girl from school and may send her to learn a trade such as dressmaking and housekeeping.³²

12. Marriage at a young age often serves as a barrier to girls' education in Cameroon. Without adequate funding to attend school, early marriage becomes the fallback. In fact, 31% of Cameroonian girls are married before age 15.³³ Education for daughters is not consistently a priority over marriage for many parents in Cameroon; as previously discussed, tradition dictates that girls are meant for marriage.³⁴ Families may believe that education is not a good investment for their female children because the high unemployment rates for young female graduates suggests to them that the higher education was a missed opportunity for marriage.³⁵ In some instances, marriage is parentally arranged when girls are very young; this precludes the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cameroon's Girls Face Educational Challenges (7 Nov. 2013), available at <http://www.openequalfree.org/girl-power/camerouns-girls-face-educational-challenges> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

³⁴ John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, "When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jiws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

³⁵ See Aissa Ngatansou Doumara, *Cameroon: a subtle violence in education*, available at <http://www.Opendemocracy.net> (24 Oct. 2013).

respondents from continuing in school.³⁶ One Cameroonian woman who as a young girl wanted to be a nurse explained how her father accepted the “bride price” and consigned her into marriage: “My father took money from a man behind my back. I wasn’t given any opportunity or right to say anything about it . . . I thought of how I was going to abandon school when I really wanted to study. I couldn’t believe that I was going to leave school without any certificate. I cried and cried.”³⁷ When their fathers ask them to get married, the women often feel little choice in the matter. As one Cameroonian woman explained: “My father couldn’t even afford to send me for a trade so I got married and became a housewife and mother. My father asked me to get married. I had to show respect so I did. I had refused the first two suitors and was afraid that if I didn’t accept the third one there wouldn’t be another.”³⁸ Another woman who wanted to become a teacher explained, “there was no one to pay for my education so I looked forward to being a housewife.”³⁹ Typically, soon after marriage, teenage girls or young women in Cameroon become pregnant because of the immediate familial and societal pressure on newly married couples to have children; thus the formal educational opportunities of these respondents essentially ends when they marry.⁴⁰ Even when one woman, whose father could not afford to further her education prior to her marriage appealed to her husband to allow her to continue her education, her husband “had no interest in sending me to school.”⁴¹ She explained that “[m]en feel that when they send their wives to school the wives may divorce them when they become rich and self-reliant.”⁴²

13. Misconceptions of the negative effects of education on girls and women are fed by the media. The media portrays the misconception that girls who go to school abandon their customs, refuse to get married and disobey their parents.⁴³

14. Cameroonian girls’ access to education is also affected by the lack of infrastructure, lack of educational materials and the shortage of qualified teachers. While the government has opened some vocational and skill development training institutions for young girls and dropouts, these institutions are few and are mostly found in urban areas.⁴⁴

³⁶ John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, “When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jiws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See Aissa Ngatansou Doumara, *Cameroon: a subtle violence in education*, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net> (24 Oct. 2013).

⁴⁴ Nkem, Josiane, UNANIMA International, Alternate NGO Report On the Situation of Discrimination Against Women Relative to Article 10 of the CEDAW Convention in Cameroon (42nd Session) (20 Oct. 2008), available at http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDkQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.unanima-international.org%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2FCEDAW-Cameroon-2008_ENG.doc&ei=1K-nUv-QLKGO2wXt64HQBg&usg=AFQjCNFOzmgsmnIF3RPlr9ygZluE08Us6w&sig2=zcJYTm8YEtjVICKUs-xz6w&bvm=bv.57799294,d.b2I (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

15. Many girls drop out of school or never even enroll due to cultural and religious traditions that discourage their education.⁴⁵ A 2009 study of 36 Cameroonian women discovered that eight respondents considered marriage as their “exclusive destiny”, though the majority had dreamed of pursuing professional careers that required education.⁴⁶ Since they will eventually leave home, and will thereafter stop contributing to their parents households, investing precious resources in the education of girls and young women is often seen as a waste of money.⁴⁷ Despite efforts to provide scholarships and grants to women and girls to pay for birth certificates and entrance fees, many families pull female children out of school or refuse to pay for the examination fees as a way to prevent girls from continuing to the next level of education.⁴⁸ This is largely a result of the cultural or religious belief that girls should not be educated and are only meant to be married.⁴⁹ With a lack of parental support and the prospect of a seemingly unchangeable fate, the girls’ motivation to work hard at school—or even to continue attending—is very low.⁵⁰ The Muslim tradition also charges a man with the responsibility of protecting and ensuring the well-being of his wife or wives, which in practice often means that a married woman cannot leave her home or village, cannot handle money, and cannot work without her husband's permission.⁵¹ She is, therefore, fully dependent upon her husband for her own—and her children’s—survival.⁵²

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

16. The Advocates poses the following questions and makes the following recommendations:

A. *Questions for the Cameroon Government:*

- Describe efforts to establish a mechanism to monitor primary education for girls, including attendance and dropout rates, barriers to education, and reasons for dropping out.
- Describe efforts to raise public awareness on the importance of education for girls and women.

⁴⁵ See United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, “Cameroon 2012 Human Rights Report”, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=154335&year=2010> (last visited 24 Oct. 2013).

⁴⁶ John, Akuri; Weinger, Susan; and Barton, Barbara, “When Personal Dreams Derail: Rural Cameroonian Women Aspire For Their Children”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 11:2 (Sept. 2009), available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1175&context=jjws> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁷ Young Women and Education in Tibati, Cameroon, West Africa: A Letter from a Peace Corps Volunteer, World History Connected (2004), available at <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.1/don.html> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

⁴⁸ See Aissa Ngatansou Doumara, *Cameroon: a subtle violence in education*, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net> (24 Oct. 2013).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Young Women and Education in Tibati, Cameroon, West Africa: A Letter from a Peace Corps Volunteer, World History Connected (2004), available at <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/2.1/don.html> (last visited 10 Dec. 2013).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

- Describe efforts to enable parents to obtain birth certificates for their female infants and obstacles to their ability to do so.
- Describe specific plans to reduce adult female illiteracy, particularly within rural areas of Cameroon.
- Describe efforts, if any, to reduce unplanned pregnancies among female youth.
- Describe efforts to support social centers created for the promotion of women's education.
- Describe what assistance, if any, is available for families who cannot afford administrative fees (books, uniforms) or meet administrative requirements (birth certificates and entrance examinations). Explain the eligibility requirements for such assistance and how many families are able to access and benefit from such assistance.

B. *Changes to Domestic Legislation and Policy*

- Enforce the registration of all children at birth and implement a system to ensure all children have a birth certificate at birth.
- Undertake measures to ensure that those children lacking a birth certificate are able to obtain one at minimal, or in cases where the family is indigent, at no cost.
- Develop and enforce a policy to waive entrance examination fees for students who cannot afford those costs.
- Undertake measures to combat forced and child marriage, as well as the harmful practice of bride price, and institute a minimum age for marriage of 18 years.

C. *Justice and Legal Sectors*

- Impose sanctions for parents or legal guardians not in compliance with the law mandating primary education for all children and those who keep children at home for service to the family or for labor exploitation.
- Develop and implement a country-wide monitoring and enforcement mechanism to ensure that all children of primary school age are attending school.

D. *Funding*

- Allocate adequate funding and sufficient government support to efforts to address unplanned pregnancy, including prevention activities, sex education, reproductive health care, economic assistance to single mothers, vocational training and continuing education programs, and social support and outreach to overcome stigmatization from unplanned pregnancy.

- Allocate adequate funding to educational assistance programs for families that cannot afford to send their children to school.
- Award subsidies in government budgets for various areas of education with special priority for programs that promote girls' education.
- Target public policies related to public spending on education toward the rural areas where poverty is higher, for example, by offering incentives to encourage teachers to work in in rural areas