

# Challenges Faced by Central African Female Refugees in Selected Host Communities: The Case of Littoral, East, and Centre Regions of Cameroon

**Ikome Ndiva Jemea**

The University of Buea, Cameroon

**Abstract:** During conflict, the majority of those who are killed or “disappeared” are men and male youths. This accounts for the refugee population to be mostly women and their dependent children (UNHCR, 1995, p. 79). Research has shown that the legal protections for women around the world, including female refugees who have experienced violence, are largely gender-blind and do not address the reality of women’s lives. In refugee-generating situations, conditions and actual refugee circumstances, issues of females take different forms like rape, survival sex, female genital mutilation, unwanted and early pregnancy, physical/ psychological and emotional abuse, defilement and bride kidnapping in the name of ‘early marriage’ and sexual harassment among different female/human rights abuses. In Cameroon, discriminatory customary laws give men more rights than women on housing, land and property issues. As a result, many women are forced to live in precarious settlements, such as with host families, temporary shelters for displaced people, lodgings donated by traditional leaders, or temporary camps. This paper investigates the challenges that female refugees from the Central African Republic face in Cameroon. The study employs a descriptive research design, collecting and analysing data through semi-structured and structured interviews. With a sample of 30 participants, 14 from the East Region, and 8 each from the Centre and Littoral Regions of Cameroon, through interviews engaging in face-to-face discussions with refugee women and girls, leaders or notable figures from the host communities, and UNHCR officials in the Gado Badzere refugee camp, through Convenient, purposive and Snowball sampling techniques. Results proved that female refugees from the Central African Republic face challenges such as limited or no availability of natural resources, as well as good jobs, and shelter, which forces them into early, forced and or child marriage, prostitution, survival sex, stealing, and begging as a means of survival. The study concludes that, based on the challenges faced by female refugees from the Central African Republic, members of host communities in Cameroon and these refugees are living in negative peace. This situation arises because they compete for limited socio-economic and natural resources, leading to female refugees often being exposed to precarious situations because of the challenges mentioned above that they face.

**Keywords:** Female Refugees, Host communities, Peacebuilding.



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## Introduction

The refugee issue is as old as human civilisation. People move from one place to another in search of better jobs, education, facilities, and more. Others flee their homeland for their lives, safety, or freedom from internal conflicts, foreign aggression, severe human rights violations, or other circumstances that severely disrupt public order over time (Øyen, 2010, p. 67). Only during these periods do the treatment of the affected individuals and the methods used to address their problems vary.

Equally most refugees 76% are hosted in low and middle-income countries, as such structural barriers combined with lack of government leadership, lack of appropriate government institutions and high levels of poverty, and unemployment do not allow adequate response to the needs of refugees and host communities which ultimately affects peacebuilding among refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2019, p. 33).

Multiple studies have found a correlation between refugees and increased objective security risks (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Jacobsen, 2002; Salehyan, 2007, pp. 6- 24). Protracted refugee situations, in particular, have been linked to several problematic issues resulting in increased crime and violence. Issues include the increase in social vices and deviant behaviour in the community (gender-based violence, rape, female genital mutilation, forced/early marriages, survival sex, sexual promiscuity, drugs, alcohol abuse, etc.), military intrusions from the refugee-sending country, the infiltration of weapons, illicit activities to sustain livelihoods on the part of refugees (Codjoe, Quartey, Tagoe, & Reed, 2012; Crisp, 2000; Jacobsen, 2000; Porter et al., 2008, pp. 67- 103).

At the same time, refugees and migrants are targeted to promote peacebuilding, and hence, with the feeling of resentment and jealousy, these refugees and migrants are attacked (Anderson, 2012, p. 323). The situation of women in refugee scenarios is even more alarming. Women comprise 65% and 85% of all refugees (Butegwa et al., 1995, p. 472). Refugee women in general suffer from an extreme lack of protection, mitigated only by the UNHCR programs implemented since 1990. When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Policy on Refugee Women was published, the need to include gender and women in refugee and post-conflict situations was addressed for the first time (Carolina, J.S. 2016, pp. 323-378).

During conflict, the majority of those who are killed or “*disappeared*” are men and male youths. This accounts for the refugee population to be mostly women and their dependent children (UNHCR, 1995, p. 79). Research has shown that the legal protections for women around the world, including female refugees who have experienced violence, are largely gender-blind and do not address the reality of women’s lives. Hilary & Christine (2000) have argued that “*the very nature of international law has made dealing with the structural disadvantages of sex and gender difficult.*” Refugee women continue to be discriminated against in situations of armed conflict, in refugee determinations, and in resettlement because of their gender (Eileen & Linda, 2001, p. 432).

In refugee-generating situations, conditions and actual refugee circumstances, issues of females take different forms like rape, survival sex, female genital mutilation, unwanted and early pregnancy, physical/ psychological and emotional abuse, defilement and bride kidnapping in the name of ‘early marriage’ and sexual harassment among different female/human rights abuses. These forms are heightened by the adverse conditions of lack of basic needs, unequal power relations, breakdown of institutions of social control and order, exposure to the dangers of group violence and low capacity of protection agencies, both local and international, and the host governments (Japheth et. al, 2019, pp. 266- 283).

Women among refugees are especially vulnerable due to their gender roles, caregiving responsibilities, and physical fragility. Many women fleeing have had limited education in their home countries, making them dependent on their partners both logistically, economically, and physically (Shishehgar et al, 2017, pp.1-3). They often bear the sole responsibility of caring for children and the elderly, which restricts their mobility and social engagement beyond their family unit. Additionally, women face a higher risk of all kinds of violence—domestic, physical, and sexual—compared to male refugees (Okeke-Ihejirika et al, 2018). Sadly, refugee women's issues have historically received little attention. Only recently has the international community begun to acknowledge their unique needs stemming from their gender.

Refugees typically encounter significant challenges in their struggle for survival, yet the obstacles faced by women refugees are distinctly gender-specific. These obstacles include, but are not limited to, sexual violence, limited access to healthcare, physical abuse, and even human trafficking. According to Friedman (2016), women refugees are particularly vulnerable to such abuses due to their gender. The scarcity of suitable resources further exacerbates the plight of female refugees. Displacement is often a profoundly disempowering experience for women, who are traditionally tasked with the care of children and the elderly, as well as domestic responsibilities. Consequently, the circumstances of displacement frequently overwhelm them (UNHCR, 2001).

Cameroon hosts more than 259,145 refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR), most of them women and children who escaped violence in the Central African Republic. But while they have found safety in Cameroon, women refugees are not always welcomed by locals and struggle to survive. According to Ellena (2024, p. 1), displaced populations in Cameroon have no choice other than to farm on marginal, poor-quality land, without legal security or protection against forced evictions. Women in particular are stripped of their property and land by members of their own family, a common practice that must be tackled to ensure inclusive and equal opportunities for all.

In Cameroon, discriminatory customary laws give men more rights than women on housing, land and property issues. As a result, many women are forced to live in precarious settlements, such as with host families, temporary shelters for displaced people, lodgings donated by traditional leaders, or temporary camps. In addition to this, female refugees in the Far North and East regions of Cameroon often face a wide range of issues: limited access to arable land, destruction of crops, discrimination in rental prices, forced evictions, secondary occupation, allocation of land without ownership documents and poorly managed agro-pastoral conflicts that often leave them worse off. The lack of basic infrastructure, such as schools, health centres and water point, further exacerbates the precarious situation of displaced communities, who are struggling to resettle, according to OCHA (2023) Between January and September 2023, 70 per cent of housing, land and property rights disputes in host refugee settings in Far North involved women, most of who are refugee heads of household.

The experiences of female refugees in host communities in Cameroon are varied and complex, shaped by a range of factors from socio-economic conditions to attitudes of the host community and government policies. Although there is an expanding body of research on refugees in host communities, a significant gap remains in understanding the detailed experiences of female refugees within these communities. Sometimes, upon their initial arrival, refugees are met with compassion, kindness, solidarity, and support as friends or relatives from host communities help them settle in. However, this goodwill is often short-lived due to limited or unavailable resources in the host communities. In other instances, host communities may be hostile towards refugees, partly because of the scarcity of resources and the perception that refugees are responsible for increases in crime and social vices. Additionally, host communities often lack awareness of government assistance programmes for both refugees and locals, since aid from the government,

UNHCR, and other NGOS predominantly targets refugees, often overlooking the host communities who share their limited resources with refugees. Female refugees face a lack of access to vital resources such as land, water, and fuelwood, which are scarce; women and girls in refugee situations are not only vulnerable but are also at greater risk of early and forced marriages, survival sex, theft, and prostitution as means of survival in Cameroon's challenging economy. Despite numerous strategies and initiatives claimed to be implemented by the Cameroon government, the UNHCR, and various NGOs, these issues persist without significant change within host-refugee environments. This study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by female refugees from the Central African Republic in selected host communities in Cameroon.

## Literature

In recent years, Cameroon has faced crises from neighbouring countries, such as Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Nigeria, creating significant insecurity for vulnerable populations, especially women, children, and the impoverished in border regions. This instability has led to a rise in sexual and gender-based violence and has threatened social cohesion among different groups (USAID, 2012, pp. 1-16). Cameroon has upheld an open-border policy, resulting in a substantial influx of refugees from Nigeria and CAR, as well as smaller groups from Chad (UNOCHA, 2015, pp. 1-12). It now accommodates the most significant number of CAR refugees, many of whom began fleeing in waves in the 2000s. In 2007, approximately 45,000 refugees, mainly from the Mbororo ethnic group, escaped due to conflicts between government forces and rebels, exacerbated by bandit kidnappings (IRIN, 2017, p. 16). Ongoing violence incited further refugee movements from CAR, particularly due to clashes between the Seleka rebel coalition and anti-balaka forces. By mid-2015, around 95.8 per cent of these refugees identified as Muslim, with the UNHCR estimating 138,243 CAR refugees in Cameroon by October 2015 (UNHCR, 2015: 3-18). Currently, over 259,000 CAR refugees live in Cameroon, the majority of whom are integrating into local communities along the border (Barbelet, 2017, pp. 1-7; UNHCR, 2012, pp. 19-23).

Based on separate data from the UNHCR, out of 259,145 Central Africans residing outside urban areas, 180,485 live in the east, 71,506 in Adamawa, and 7,154 in the North. Additionally, there are 10,600 refugees in the urban area of Yaoundé, along with another 7,700 in Douala (UNHCR, 2016). These Central Africans inhabit 314 sites and villages, with 71,000 residing in seven improved locations supported by UNHCR, although access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities is still limited. Many reside with host families, have constructed their shelters, or live outdoors (UNOCHA, 2015, p.18). Another figure from UNOCHA notes that of the 253,000 Central African refugees, 43 per cent arrived before 2014, while 57 per cent arrived afterwards (UNOCHA, 2015, p. 27). The number of Cameroonian hosts in need stands at 553,000, with 336,000 located in the extreme North. More specific information about refugees in the east reveals that approximately 30 per cent are settled in five camps: Gado-Badzere, Mbile, Lolo, Timangolo, and Ngarisingo.

Moreover, 70 per cent of the refugees have assimilated into host communities that typically designate specific zones for all refugees to establish a community within the village limits (UNHCR, 2015, pp. 5-19). Thankfully, most of these roughly 85 locations are located along the routes connecting the three principal cities: Bertoua, Batouri, and Garoua-Boulaï, the border city that shelters many asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2016). Other figures reveal that nearly half of the asylum seekers who arrived since 2013 reside in improved sites, while the other half live with host communities (ECHO, 2016). According to UNHCR (2015), CAR asylum seekers in Cameroon originate from the following prefectures in CAR: Nana-Mambéré (32 per cent), Ouham-Pendé (21 per cent), Bangui (16 per cent), Mambéré-Kadéï (14 per cent), Ombella-M'Poko (10 per cent), and other regions (7 per cent). This group displays a more varied ethnic makeup, incorporating Hausas and Bayas as well as Mbororos. Furthermore, these asylum seekers possess historical and



ethnic connections with eastern Cameroonians; the Bayas represent a significant minority among this group, along with economic relationships based on trade (Barbelet, 2017, p. 3).

Female refugees encounter assimilation hurdles that are frequently more substantial than those confronted by male asylum seekers. These challenges include linguistic barriers, cultural discrepancies, restricted access to employment, and obstacles in navigating educational systems, all worsened by additional responsibilities related to domestic tasks and childcare (Albrecht, Pérez & Stitteneder, 2021, pp. 95-107). As primary caregivers, women significantly influence their children's experiences, emphasising the significance of providing enhanced opportunities for them today to improve future results in the job market and education. Women constitute over half of all asylum seekers in developing nations and account for one-third of the global asylum seeker population, underscoring the urgent need for achieving gender parity (European Commission 2018, p. 1). Despite the recognised necessity for gender-specific strategies, Albrecht, Pérez, and Stitteneder (2021, pp. 33-56) indicate that such strategies have often been overlooked in integration initiatives. Although some attempts have been made to tackle these inequalities, considerable disparities continue to exist for women, especially those who are asylum seekers, in both political and economic domains.

Refugees encounter various survival difficulties, but female refugees confront unique gender-specific challenges such as sexual aggression, limited healthcare accessibility, physical maltreatment, and human trafficking. Friedman (2016, p. 188) observes that these gender-related barriers render women especially vulnerable to exploitation, while a scarcity of resources exacerbates their suffering. Displacement frequently deprives women of their empowerment as primary caretakers for children and the elderly, resulting in hardship under their new situations (UNHCR, 2001, pp. 5-18).

In refugee camps, women often find themselves confined to domestic duties and dependent on male relatives for vital needs, frequently being excluded from decision-making positions. CARE (2017) highlights that traditional cultural customs within host communities create tension regarding women's empowerment, leading to restrictions on their mobility and access to resources. Additionally, an increase in women's paid work can sometimes trigger domestic violence and harassment. Research reveals that in specific camps, every woman and girl has either experienced sexual assault or has witnessed it; yet many still convey a greater sense of safety within the camps (Action Against Hunger, Save the Children & Oxfam, 2018). Nevertheless, findings from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (2017) indicate that overcrowded living conditions and insufficient facilities elevate the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) for women and girls. Poor lighting and patriarchal customs further limit their freedom of movement and access to assistance, leaving adolescent girls particularly at risk (IFRC, 2017).

The experiences and susceptibilities of female refugees markedly differ from those of males, as highlighted in a UNHCR report (2011, p. 56). Cultural norms often confer lower status to women, leading to their dependence on men, while restricted educational opportunities impede their access to decision-making roles and livelihoods. Women also face further barriers to essential services, including legal protection and reproductive health care. For instance, the lack of sanitary products may obstruct their ability to partake in activities aimed at addressing their vulnerabilities. Moreover, they encounter difficulties such as inaccessible asylum systems, gender-insensitive needs assessments, and the persistent threat of sexual and gender-based violence (UNSC, 2017, pp. 33-67).

Concentrating solely on the vulnerabilities of women can portray them as mere victims. Nevertheless, refugee women and girls exhibit strength and resilience, along with valuable social capital. A comprehensive viewpoint acknowledges that they are both resourceful and marginalised. It is crucial to address the protection needs of refugee women in conjunction with

those of men and boys, confronting structural vulnerabilities stemming from gender inequality while also harnessing their strengths (Forced Migration Research Network, 2017, pp. 1-13).

Despite facing various forms of discrimination, refugee women and girls actively contribute to their communities. In many camps, they run crèches, care for orphaned children, create safe spaces for survivors of violence, manage limited rations, operate small businesses, organise schools, and establish protections for their families (Bartolomei, 2015; Olivius, 2014, pp. 233-268). Much of this work is done without funding or external support. Women refugees take on all family roles in the absence of men, leveraging a mix of formal and informal skills. They understand the challenges in their communities and potential solutions. However, their capacities often go unrecognised due to their minority status, limited representation, restricted access to education, gender stereotypes, and insufficient funding for targeted programs (Olivius, 2014, pp. 32-45).

Throughout history, female refugees have consistently faced disparities in various social, economic, political, and cultural aspects. Women and girls often occupy a lower position than men, confronting bias and exclusion within both refugee and broader communities. Female migrants and refugees encounter comparable, if not greater, difficulties in integration than their male counterparts. Their hurdles extend beyond language, culture, access to employment, and Western educational systems; women traditionally also bear additional responsibilities related to domestic tasks and childcare. These challenges are thus twofold (Albrecht et al, 2021, p. 188). It is widely acknowledged that international displacement, influenced by patriarchy and gender inequality, impacts women differently than men, resulting in distinct protection requirements and related issues (Pasha, 2014, p. 201).

Female refugees make up more than 50% of the refugee population, yet they are frequently depicted in policy and practice as a vulnerable minority. Their potential to contribute to solutions is often overlooked, rendering gender equality an elusive objective. Although extensive laws and policies have been established over the past three decades to meet the protection needs of refugee women and girls, they continue to experience widespread rape and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which both results from and obstructs progress toward gender equality. Crawley and Lester's analysis acknowledges that when individuals face persecution due to their race or ethnic identity, the experience may vary based on gender. They note that 'persecutors may choose to destroy the ethnic identity and/or prosperity of a racial group by killing, maiming or incarcerating the men, while the women may be viewed as propagating the ethnic or racial identity and persecuted differently, such as through sexual violence or control of reproduction (UNHCR, 2014, pp. 1- 14) '.

This restricts access to essential protective measures like services, information, decent employment, healthcare, and education, all of which are fundamental for self-sufficiency. Additionally, it hampers the pursuit of sustainable solutions that should be available equally to both men and women. The significant social and economic strengths of refugee women and girls are frequently underused, and their voices are often disregarded. Numerous barriers hinder their equality with men and boys. As long as this persists, women and girls remain vulnerable, and their potential contributions to problem-solving are overlooked (Grandi, 2017, pp. 33-48).

## **Methodology**

The study employs a descriptive research design, collecting and analysing data through semi-structured and structured interviews. As a qualitative study, a sample of 30 participants was selected, including from the 14 East Region, and 8 each from the Centre and Littoral Regions of Cameroon. Dworkin (2012, p. 2) recommends a minimum sample size of 12 to 20 participants for qualitative research to achieve saturation. Brinkmann (2013, p. 3) observes that qualitative studies generally should not exceed 15 participants for saturation purposes, while Johnson (2006, pp. 1-

5) claims that saturation can be attained with a minimum of 6 to 8 participants in a homogeneous group. It was logical that the researcher interviewed at least 8 participants from each region, although no fixed number guarantees saturation.

The study included 30 participants, chosen to allow the researcher to collect ample data on the diverse perspectives, opinions, attitudes, expectations, societal challenges, and peacebuilding initiatives of Central African Republic female refugees in host communities in Cameroon. The use of direct, face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher to engage in individual conversations with each participant, aiming to understand and gather data on the various challenges these female refugees face in host communities in Cameroon. This study utilises direct interviews, including both semi-structured and structured formats.

Interviews were carried out on a diverse scale, with the researcher engaging in face-to-face discussions with refugee women and girls, leaders or notable figures from the host communities, and UNHCR officials in the Gado Badzere refugee camp. These individuals hold influential positions that aid refugees in settling down. Data collection also focused on their insights regarding the causes of conflicts between hosts and refugees, as well as their impacts on female refugees, including their experiences. In this study, interviews were recorded using an audio tape recorder, with the consent of the participants. However, the interviewer recognised that some participants might be uncomfortable with recordings. Therefore, the interviewer discussed the recording process and took notes instead for those respondents.

This study obtains its sample size through the use of non-probability sampling techniques through convenience, purposive and Snowball sampling techniques. A convenient sampling method was implemented in both Garoua-Boulai and the Gado-Badzere refugee camp. The researcher purposively targeted notable individuals for interviews, including UNHCR officials, village heads from host communities, police officials, and social affairs representatives, to comprehend the various challenges female refugees face in Cameroon. The researcher utilised the Snowball sampling method, specifically in the host communities of the Centre and Littoral regions. The former serves as Cameroon's economic capital, while the latter is the political capital, making both towns major, densely populated, and cosmopolitan centres in the country. Notably, these areas lack designated refugee sites, which makes it challenging to identify refugees, as they do not visibly identify as such. To address this, the researcher relied on each refugee encountered to recommend the location(s) where other refugees might be found for study participation. In each town/ host community, the researcher employed a bilingual assistant to aid in data collection for the study. Additionally, he reached out to participants and conducted interviews on days when they were less busy. Ultimately, the researcher interviewed 30 participants from the East Region (15), eight from the Centre Region, and eight from the Littoral Region. He also spoke with UNHCR officials, heads of host communities, NGO workers, an INGO representative, and Social Affairs officials within the studied regions.

## Results

This research highlights the significant challenges encountered by female refugees, provoking a strong sense of empathy for their plight. Many respondents noted that illiteracy, largely due to restricted educational access, serves as a major obstacle, leaving these women and girls feeling confined and devoid of opportunities. It's truly disheartening to consider the many women who wish to learn and develop, yet face overwhelming difficulties, as a UNHCR worker in Gado-badzere refugee camp equally aligned with the complaints of the aforementioned respondent by voicing out that:

They have no access to further education because of poverty, and the very long-distance schools are located ... (Interview with Participant E07, December 2024).

Moreover, the economic challenges they face are immense. Many respondents observed that numerous female refugees are compelled to accept low-paying or unpaid positions to support themselves, often depending on unstable jobs within the host community. This struggle for survival is not only taxing but also disheartening, as they endeavour to provide for themselves and their families. Some respondents expressed their feelings in this way:

We face financial difficulties, and access to good jobs is hard to get. There are no opportunities for sustainable jobs here. Often, the best you can find is to work for a local on his farm and get paid little money or with some of the harvested farm produce, which often causes us to query the locals (Interview with Participant FN11, October 2024).

Furthermore, another participant in the study equally expressed sadness, stating that:

Most of us face the issue of working for community members for little or no pay ... I had to add selling puff-puffs and beans in the evening because I noticed working for people on their farms was not enough to meet my needs (Interview with Participant L01, November 2024).

The issue of early marriage is another painful reality mentioned by some respondents. Driven by a lack of shelter, limited access to land, and the constant threat of hunger, many female refugees from the Central African Republic find themselves marrying early for financial security. This difficult choice often leads to situations of gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancies, compounding their struggles and robbing them of their agency. Some of them said:

Because of poverty most female refugees are sexually abused because they want shelter and to be sure of their daily bread, they get married early just so they can ensure their survival ... we are happy when the locals here marry us because we are sure of shelter, food and access to land (Interview with Participant E14, October, 2024).

More to the above, another respondent equally added that:

*Forced and early marriage also occur in the form of kidnap and trafficking ... although we have not gotten reports there are rumours of child marriage taking place in hiding, very late in the dark of night, since both host and refugees know it is punishable by law ... another rumour is that host members kidnap young refugee girls and when they notice these girls have assimilated to their environment, they rush to their families in hiding to tell them the girl is not missing or kidnapped, that they are with the girl and they/he have come to pay her bride price, since most of these refugee families are poor and vulnerable they often accept and carry out the marital rights in secret ... this often lead to unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse, and other sexually transmissible diseases which are some of the problems most female refugees go through (Interview with Participant E03, October 2024).*

Additionally, the stigma and discrimination that refugees encounter make their lives even more challenging. It is profoundly concerning to learn that some members of the host community perceive these women as inferior. This situation underscores the pressing necessity for compassion and support; every refugee is entitled to dignity, respect, and the opportunity to restore their lives in peace and safety.

I cannot get a good husband ... they insult and disrespect us because we are refugees (Interview with Participant E10, December 2024).



Furthermore, the study unearthed the prevalence of theft and prostitution as a means of survival by female refugees; the majority of these responses were from the Littoral and Centre regions of Cameroon and a minute from the East North region. In their voices, some of the respondents said:

Just because some of our sisters want to survive, they prostitute and also allow their young daughters to prostitute and steal from their customers ... that is why some Cameroonians do not trust us (Interview with Participant C02, November 2024).

Another respondent, a police official in Akwa, said:

Those who do prostitution sometimes fight with customers who either refuse to pay or do not pay what they agreed on for the service ... we often handle such issues in the station (Interview with Participant L06, November 2024).

From the aforementioned data gathered from the study, peacebuilding and social cohesion are interrupted in host communities and female refugee settings because female refugees find it difficult to survive in a weak economy like that of Cameroon. From a comparative perspective, most female refugees from the East Region often try to survive through the means of early and child marriage, with a iota of prostitution and survival sex, which from the results often led to rape and other gender-based violence acts. While in the Cosmopolitan Littoral and Centre Regions of Cameroon, female refugees relied more on prostitution and theft, as such portrays the challenges faced by female refugees from the Central African Republic in these communities in Cameroon.

### **Challenges Faced by Refugees due to Limited Resources in Host Communities**

The majority of the study participants (22 out of 30) voiced concerns regarding the challenges they encounter due to restricted access to crucial resources such as land, forests, water, and fuel wood. It is disheartening that a significant number of those who raised this issue (12 respondents) are from the East Region, and smaller groups from the Centre (6) and Littoral (4) Regions. In the words of some respondents:

Water is a major issue, refugees often have to walk for long distances to access water, limited fuelwood availability ... refugees sometimes venture to get it out of the camp which is dangerous for female refugees who are sometimes raped or sexually harassed by both male refugees and locals of host communities (Interview with Participant E03, December, 2024).

Furthermore, a respondent from Bonaberi, Douala, also complained that:

Often, when the tap cuts out, we are forced to go to a faraway stream or buy water from those who have bore-holes for a hundred francs per 20 litres, but during the rainy season, we make use of rainwater (Interview with Participant L02, November 2024).

Conversely, a few respondents (6) expressed a vague disagreement with the idea that resource scarcity poses a major challenge for female refugees. This group included three female respondents from the Littoral Region, two from the Centre Region and one from the East Region. Recognising the variety of viewpoints within this community is essential. Respondent FN9 ironically stated:

This is because this camp is located in a semi-arid region; as such, access to clean water, fuel, and wood is limited. Refugees often rely on alternative energy sources such as charcoal, which is expensive and also leads to deforestation (Interview with Participant E09, October 2024).

Another respondent from Littoral corroborated by stating that:

Even though they have access to these resources, they are sold to them; they either buy or rent lands for farming, and as for the other resources, they are forced to buy them, most especially water, fuel wood or charcoal (Interview with Participant L07, November 2024).

Lastly, two respondents from the Centre Region shared feelings of indifference, reminding us that experiences can vary widely within these challenging circumstances. One of them said:

This is Central Town. If you work hard, you will survive; if you don't, you will end up in the police net (Interview with Participant C01, November 2024).

Conclusively, almost all respondent in the study all acknowledge scarcity of natural resources such as water, fuelwood and land etc in their various host communities which sometimes make them vulnerable to rape and other sexual abuse, as stated by one of the respondents in the aforementioned responses, the study equally showed that respondents from Littoral and Centre regions cope by often buying most of these resources, to the extent that they don't see it as a problem since it is a norm in most of the host communities these female refugees find themselves.

### **The Effects of Challenges/Marginalisation Faced by Female refugees**

Almost all of the respondents in the study accepted that because female refugees are marginalised, they find themselves in precarious and vulnerable positions that act as push factors for prostitution, early/child marriage, money marriage, and survival sex. A small portion, particularly those from the cosmopolitan regions of the Centre and Littoral regions, also hold this view, as it has pushed female refugees not only into these issues but also into begging, stealing, and performing odd jobs for little or no remuneration. Pathetically, in their altercations:

I do not know why ... but here women do prostitution for as low as 300 francs to survive this was rampant in the Corona Virus period, it often cost conflict and tension among refugee prostitutes and the prostitutes who are locals here ... because the Cameroonians here were angry and frustrated that the refugee prostitutes were spoiling business for them ... they query break bottles and threaten to use it as weapon to fight (Interview with Participant L04, November, 2024).

Another respondent from East held the same view, though from another perspective, she stated that:

Girls as young as 10 to 15 years old are often forced into marriage with men, locals here, as a means of survival, which creates access to necessities like food, water, and land to farm (Interview with Participant E13, October 2024).

Furthermore, another respondent from Littoral equally complained about the effects of survival marriage on how it distorts peace and peacebuilding among the refugees and members of host communities by stating that:

Some women, as well as men, refugees have run away from marriage to marry locals here because they want a roof over their head and food... and some of the locals too are often married... this often causes a lot of problems between us refugees and members of host communities who are also angry with us that we are breaking marriages (Interview with Participant L05, November 2024).

A female refugee respondent equally held the view that she prefers to beg rather than to prostitute, in her voice:

I am a female street beggar, and most of my sisters do the same job to survive. We prefer to do this rather than stealing or prostituting like some of our brothers and sisters, who bring shame to us (Interview with Participant C03, November 2024).

The aforementioned results proof that because female refugees are not empowered, they are forced to beg or prostitute, which is more rampant in the cosmopolitan regions of Littoral and Centre while in the Non-cosmopolitan regions female refugees are forced to do early and child marriage while a common factor in all four regions was survival sex or marriage, but it should be noted that the issues raised by all aforementioned respondents was found in at least iotas in all regions.

## Conclusion

The study noted that the influx of refugees in Cameroon has resulted in a high rate of insecurity, theft, and prostitution among both nationals and refugees, stemming from the limited availability of socio-economic and natural resources, such as high unemployment and land and water scarcity. The proliferation of motor taxis has exacerbated the increasing robberies and insecurity in urban and rural areas. The cross-border mobility that has penetrated the fabric of Cameroonian society has consequences for urban and rural security in the aforementioned regions studied. The study equally noted that although many instruments and laws have been implemented to protect female refugees, there is still much work to be done to ensure the human rights of these women and girls in host refugee settings. Protection is central to the international community's responsibility toward female refugees, who face unique vulnerabilities.

Based on the challenges faced by female refugees from the Central African Republic, members of host communities in Cameroon and these refugees are living in a negative peace. This situation arises because they compete for limited socio-economic and natural resources, leading to female refugees often exposed to precarious situations and the aforementioned challenges. As a result, female refugees are negatively affected as they bear the brunt of SGBV, STDS, rape, unemployment, and limited or no access to education or jobs, forcing them into prostitution, early and child marriage, and theft as means of survival. It is therefore imperative to consider gender as a critical variable of analysis by state and non-state actors in host-refugee settings, as it is essential in promoting peacebuilding and female refugees' empowerment within these contexts in Cameroon.

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