

Assessing Institutional Measures to Protect Women with Special Needs in Cameroon

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Abstract

Women with special needs in most societies including Cameroon have been termed the most vulnerable as a result of their sex and disability. Not only are this women the weaker sex but are also plagued by disability which makes them more vulnerable to attack, violence, marginalization, discrimination and social exclusion. In order to protect this group, the UN mandates state parties to the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to take positive measures to afford adequate protection for this very vulnerable group of women. Despite respecting the call of the UN, the institutional measures put in place to protect this woman in Cameroon are found lacking given that they still live in lack and total disregard of the fundamental human rights.

Keywords: Women with Special Needs, Vulnerable, Disability, Protection, Rights.

Introduction and Background

Advancing the welfare of persons particularly women with special needs is particularly important as they comprise part of poorest group in the world. Across the world, disability is more prevalent among women, older people, children and poor population groups.¹ Studies show that women with special needs are a more likely to experience stigma, discrimination, deprivation, exclusion from many socio-economic activities and are more likely to be victims of violence or rape, and less likely to obtain police intervention, legal protection or preventive care.² Women suffer from double discrimination by virtue of their sex, as well as their disability which therefore necessitates the intervention of the Cameroon Government through institutional mechanisms to ensure proper protection for their rights.

It has been indicated that, on an average, and as a group, women with special needs are more likely to experience adverse socio-economic conditions such as lower educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, lower employment and higher rates of poverty than persons without special needs³. The capacities of WWSNs, assets and entitlements are limited by disability – especially where disability intersects with class, sexual orientation, race, gender, and level of education. While situations WWSNs depend on the type of disability, and statuses: class, race and employment history, a majority these women particularly in rural areas languish in poverty.⁴ As a consequence, they are more likely to have limited access to safe housing, food, and health.

¹World Health and Disability Statistics, accessed at disabled-world.com, on the 3rd of March 2020.

²*Ibid.*

³ Maxwell P. Opoku et al , “Lives of Persons with Disabilities in Cameroon after CRPD : Voices of persons with disabilities in Buea Municipality in Cameroon”, *Int J Disabil Hum, Dev*, 2016. P 4.

⁴ Cowen D., “Advancing the Rights of Rural Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe: Challenges and opportunities for the Twenty First Century”, Published PhD Thesis, Faculty of Law, university of South Africa, 2018, p 1.



Having ratified the Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities, Cameroon is therefore mandated to take measures to ensure adequate protection, respect and fulfilment of the rights of this vulnerable women. This Article focuses on the national institutional measures put in place to protect the rights of women with special needs in Cameroon.

A. Institutional Measures Advancing Protection for Women with Special Needs in Cameroon

i. National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms in Cameroon (N.C.H.R.F).

The National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms is an independent institution for consultation, monitoring, evaluation, dialogue, concerted action, promotion and protection in the domain of human rights.⁵

The NCHRF is an independent national institution responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights in general.⁶ In this respect, it deals with all cases of alleged or undeclared human rights violations and makes an objective decision with a view to reducing these violations, punishing the perpetrators and encouraging the public authorities to take consistent decisions.

This institution has the general mandate to ensure the promotion and the protection of the rights of everybody, including women with special needs. In the framework of its activities, it submits annual reports to the Head of State and the president of the National Assembly; semi-annual reports to the Prime Minister, Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation and also to the Minister of Justice.⁷ These reports can also be sent to its international partners especially the United Nations. In order to implement this law, a Working Group in charge of the rights of special categories of persons was created within this Commission in November 2006, and it is presently headed by a person with disability who is a member of the Commission.⁸

As the Government is the primary guarantor of the protection of human rights, the role of the Commission is to provide it with assistance by making available its knowledge, know-how and recommendations, through technical training and the publication each year of a Report on the State of Human Rights in Cameroon.⁹ In order to assist the Government in upholding universal human rights norms, the NCHRF is actively engaged in the administration of justice, legislative amendments, and human rights education. Notwithstanding the functions of the NCHRF in protecting the rights of all Cameroonian citizens including women with special needs, there is no record known to the researcher which indicates the commission's involvement in human rights issues of persons with special needs particularly women with special needs. Women with special needs are one of the most neglected persons in the Cameroonian society. Despite several

⁵ Accessed at <https://cfnhri.org/members/africa/cameroon>, on the 8 of October 2020.

⁶ Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, November, 2008

⁷ Eva J. E. M Study on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Cameroon, August 2017, accessed on the 8 of October 2020.

⁸ This person is Mr.Ondoua Abah Gabriel, Chairman of the National Union of Associations of Persons with Disabilities of Cameroon (UNAPHAC).

⁹*Ibid.*



attempts to bring to lamp lights the many difficulties suffered by these group of persons, many people give deaf ears to their plight.

It is expected that the government will actively be involved in disability sensitization campaigns in addition to the numerous disability laws that exist both at the national and international levels to foster protection and fulfil its obligations to them. However, these expectations remain imaginations as the plight of women with special needs continue to worsen as days go by.

The NCHRF seems to be more focused on political issues forgetting to address the problems of the Cameroonian people particularly women with special needs who are the most vulnerable in our society. It is a pity that this commission has failed to take up its responsibilities. However, it is hoped that this paper gets to the proper authorities so that good fruits can be yield in this domain.

ii. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the protection of women with special needs

Inclusive development that leaves no one behind is the basis of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This aspiration resounds profoundly with persons with special needs including women across the world, as they are one of the most marginalized and excluded population groups.¹⁰ Women with special needs are in a very disadvantaged positions in terms of employment, educational attainment, access to health care and other services as well as participation in the various aspects of the society.

The Cameroon governments is increasingly committed to improving the situation of persons with special needs generally and ensuring that they are included in the society. This evident in the 1966 constitution and other laws demonstrated by the fact that inclusion of persons with disabilities is an aspiration of the country.

The ministry of social affairs is the principal government structure that in charge of issues for persons with special needs in Cameroon. It is responsible for the development and implementation of government policy on prevention, assistance and socially vulnerable persons protection.¹¹ Within this Ministry, there exists a department in charge of the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. This Ministry works as an umbrella under which other organisations of the civil society operate. The missions of this department are as follows:

- The establishment of a disability card to persons with disabilities in the case of a disability that is approved by the competent authorities. This is an official identity issued by the ministry of social affairs in Cameroon to serve as an official recognition of the state of Cameroon vis-à-vis persons with disabilities.¹² It guarantees privileges, opportunities and benefits to persons with disabilities as enumerated in legal instruments. E.g. Conventions, laws and secular letters.

¹⁰ Strengthening social protection for persons with disability in Arab countries, 2017, accessed at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/social-protection-persons-disabilities>, on the 10 of October 2020.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Ngasa W.N et al, Manual on the Rights of persons with Disabilities, June 2015.



It is issued to persons with disabilities whose impairment and degree of inability is rated above 50%. Its acquisition requires compilation of documents as listed below.

- The creation of rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities in Yaoundé, Buea and Garoua to provide them with professional training in specialised domains;
- The allocation of subventions for the smooth operation of associations and institutions that work with or for persons with disabilities. This is because, the terms of article 24 (2) of the 1990 decree which allocates material or financial assistance to persons with disabilities have not always been respected. Even when it is respected, the amount is not aligned with respect to the demand;
- The creation in 1996 of the National Committee for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of persons with disabilities in order to put together, initiatives to create an environment of equal opportunity for persons with disabilities;
- The creation of a specialised school for the deaf (ESEDA);
- The creation of a follow-up centre for retarded and mentally deranged persons (Centre Jamot).

The responsibilities of this ministry is to implement state laws relating to vulnerable persons particularly women with special needs. However, given the numerous abuses these persons face, one begins to wonder what exactly the duties of this Ministry is. With regards to abuse and violence, most women with special needs reported being exposed to sexual and physical violence in Cameroon. Interviewees confirmed that they suffered some form of abuse and violence from strangers, employers and even family members. In some cases, they are abused by their relatives... One form of abuse rampant is that of family members who keep persons with disabilities particularly women in private rooms where they are not supposed to be seen by visitors...

We get information of this kind from community members and relatives of families abusing persons with disability particularly women. Even though both men and women are affected by other forms of violence, women with disabilities are mostly victim affected.¹³ They are sexually abused by strangers and family members in the pretext of curing diseases and spelling bad luck... However, some just take advantage of their conditions, and therefore cannot be able to resist sexual violence.¹⁴ A woman with special needs revealed that:

“I was living with my paternal uncle and one of his friends was making advances at me. One day while everyone had gone out he came and when I rejected his offer he attempted to force me to bed. Luckily enough for me my nephew walked in.”¹⁵

Disability from many studies and observation appears to be the major risk factor accounting for the vulnerability of women with special needs to abuse, physical and sexual violence. In fact, Groce¹⁶ found that women with disability are three times more likely to be victims of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Being a woman with a disability increases vulnerability

¹³Interview with Social Worker, Tantoh Clarisse with CBC, on the 7th of June 2020.

¹⁴ Interview with Madam Veronica, president of Disabled women association Bamenda. On the 7th March 2020.

¹⁵Interview with Mary Asumpta, a woman with physical impairment on the 5th of March 2020.

¹⁶*Ibid.*



to sexual abuse.¹⁷ The vulnerability of women with special needs to sexual violence is also due to societal beliefs that sexual intercourse with a disabled woman and a virgin is a cure to some diseases.¹⁸ Based on this misconception, many women with special needs have been sexually abused, thus exposing them to many deadly diseases.

The fact that most of the women with special needs in this study had a low level of education further exacerbate the violations of their rights which go without a remedy.

Based on these reports, the researcher calls on the Ministry and Social Affairs and other state agencies charged with the protection of the rights of women with special needs to take up their responsibilities to give these group of persons a chance to enjoy their fundamental human rights on an equal basis with abled persons.

iii. The Rehabilitation Institute for the Blind (RIB)

The RIB was established in 1967 in Bavenga, a village located in the town of Buea, then transferred to its present site in 1968.

Although functional since 1967, the RIB was formally established by Presidential Decree No.80/380 of 3 September 1980. Its general mission consists of ensuring the rehabilitation of blind or visually impaired people through the learning by them of life-long skills or a vocational training for their empowerment. Specifically, it is responsible for ensuring:

- The special education of visually impaired and blind young Cameroonians;
- The vocational training of residents;
- The socio-economic integration of the latter through the transmission of common life skills and the learning of a socio-economic or socio-political activity;
- The continuous training of its technical staff

The administration of the institution is held by a Board of Directors and a Management team. The Board of Directors makes any useful suggestions on the Administration and the Direction of the Centre, advises on the admission records, the duration of studies, and the possible compensation of temporary instructors.

The centre runs the following sections:

- The school and special education section
- The vocational training section
- The aftercare section.¹⁹

The aim of the government of Cameroon creating Bulu Blind center was to bring hope to visually impaired persons; which include the blind and low vision persons including women with same conditions. It is quite interesting to find that the center which runs under the auspices of the state offers educational and training programs for visually impaired persons which facilitates their inclusion in the main stream society.

The center which is under the ministry of social affairs also organizes many social activities such as musical and cultural activities, training sessions for programs such as carpentry and

¹⁷ B. J. Berinyuy, Human Rights Consultant at Expert Institute and Co-Founder of Enough for all Organizations.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ http://www.minas.gov.cm/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=65&Itemid=199&lang=en, accessed on the 4th of January 2021.



many other handwork programs to boast the potentials of these persons. Cultural activities as well as football competitions are also organized in the premises of the center.

Notwithstanding these activities, observations show that persons with visual impairments who are constantly at the center live in lack. Physically, they do not look well taken care of. The environment itself is not befitting for an institution created and under the auspices of a government.

The people constantly suffer from lack or insufficient water supply and have to walk a far distance to get water pipe borne water with their conditions.

The Bulu blind center is made of adult, children both males and females age ranged from 4-35 years residing at the center. The center is made up of classrooms, dormitories, administrative building, health unit and IT center. From observations, the classrooms, dormitories and health unit present at the vicinity are not really in good shape. These areas appear very unkempt particularly the dormitories where these group of persons reside.

Joan a woman with blindness revealed the many problems they face living at the center. She reported that they have to walk a long distance in search of water especially in the dry seasons.²⁰

It is usually not easy for them given their condition.

Another woman with low vision complained about health and sanitation condition. She said sometimes it is difficult for them to get instant treatment when they fall ill due to constant shortage of medications. She also spoke of the sanitation of their environment particularly the dormitory which is constantly dirty. With these conditions it will be reasonable for the entire Buea residents to assist these group of persons maybe visiting to carry out clean ups and provide other services such as educational supports and training sessions. Although the center is state owned, we as citizens must give a helping hand because we make up the government and therefore must actively participate in making the lives of persons with visual impairments particularly women better.²¹

iv. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF)

The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family was created by Decree No 2005/008 of 29th March 2005. This ministry exist in all regions of Cameroon.

This ministry is responsible for the preparation and implementation of government measures and policies relating to the promotion and respect of women's rights and the protection of the family; by ensuring the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, ensuring quality education for women at all levels.²² The ministry proposes strategies and measures to both government and non-governmental institutions whose mandate is advocating for the rights of women to better protect women generally including those with special needs.

The minister was created so as to afford protection for women and enable them carry out their role in the society, by building their capacities through seminars and workshop education. The ministry was equally created to facilitate the empowerment of women in all sectors of the economy; by promoting education of the girl child and women through sensitization.

²⁰ Interview with Joan a woman with visual impairment.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Accessed at spm.gov.cm, on the 16th of August 2021.



The Ministry works together with other ministries like the Ministry of Social Affairs and Civil Society Organisations to raise awareness on the societal ills plaguing the nation with regards to women. The Ministry is also in charge of organising sensitization campaigns to educate the general public on the importance of the respect of human rights particularly those of women with special needs. The ministry is equally in charge of empowering women especially the impoverished by giving them finances to start-up businesses.

However, despite the existence of this institution which focuses on the protection of the rights of women, the situation of violation of the rights of women with special needs have remain unchanged.

B. Conclusion

Women with special needs form the most vulnerable group in most societies. On an average, and as a group, women with special needs are more likely to experience adverse socio-economic conditions such as lower educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, lower employment and higher rates of poverty than persons without special needs²³. It is in a bid to protect this vulnerable group of women that the Cameroon Government put in place institutional mechanisms to assist in fulfilling and upholding the rights of this group of women; even though the measures have proven to be a failure.

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