

AEISATU BOUBA, MBORORO PASTORALIST, CAMEROON



Aeisatu Bouba /Photo: The Cameroon Indigenous Women Forum

“As an OHCHR indigenous fellow I had the possibility to improve my knowledge of the United Nations system and its human rights instruments and mechanisms during the Indigenous Fellowship Programme that took place from 20 June to 22 July 2011. In addition, right after the training in Geneva, within the framework of the OHCHR National Fellowship Programme, I had the opportunity to put into practice what I had learnt in Geneva at OHCHR’s Central Africa Regional Office. My experience within the Regional Office, which offered plenty of trainings, workshops and seminars on indigenous peoples, widened my knowledge and skills in preparing and delivering presentations and therefore, in transmitting knowledge and experience to my indigenous community.

I am a Mbororo Fulani pastoralist, one of the indigenous peoples in Cameroon. Mostly concentrated in the North-West, East and Adamaoua regions of the country, Mbororo Fulani pastoralists can be found in all regions of Cameroon. They represent almost 10% (1.5 – 2 million) of the population of Cameroon, a country made up of more than 250 ethnic groups. The Mbororo Fulani pastoralists live mainly on top of hills with their cattle in search for greener pasture, and count on cattle rearing as their main economic activity/source of income.

The geographic location of this community contributes to its illiteracy rate because children have to travel very far to the nearest school. The illiteracy rate of Mbororo Fulani pastoralist women is around 98% according to data collected in 2011 by the “Forum des Femmes Autochtones du Cameroun” (FFAC) known in English as the Cameroon Indigenous Women Forum. This percentage is almost three times higher than the average illiteracy rate of young women in Cameroon which was around 33% in 2007 according to the World Bank. Illiteracy contributes to the vulnerability of these women, who already suffer from discrimination, marginalization and who face difficulties in accessing social facilities such as schools or hospitals. Forced and early marriages (12-13-year-old girls) contribute to the illiteracy rate as well: girls are often taken out of school by their parents to get married to older men, often having to face polygamy, and depend on their husbands as they do not work.



Indigenous peoples, Santa Village, Cameroon/Photo: The Cameroon Indigenous Women Forum

The bitter experience I had as an indigenous woman is mainly due to the traditional ways of treating women in my community. This treatment explains my current activities, more specifically spearheading of the creation of the “Forum des Femmes Autochtones du Cameroun” which I presently coordinate. Established in 2011 in Santa (Cameroon), the Forum seeks to promote a culture of inclusive decision making in Cameroon, where, as mentioned above, indigenous women are often marginalized. The main area of action of the Forum includes alleviation of the generally poor living conditions through income-generating activities and access to education for indigenous girls. The Forum mainly targets the Forest and Mbororo pastoralist women and its activities intend to cover all ten regions of Cameroon.

Various activities, organized by the Forum have included a conference on “Indigenous Peoples’ Access to Education: Stakes and Challenges” to celebrate the 2012 World Indigenous Day. This event brought together around 100 representatives of indigenous and other non-governmental organizations, as well as government officials. The choice of the theme was mainly because of the sad reality of early and forced marriages of the girls in indigenous communities of Cameroon in general. A presentation during the workshop indicated that about 80% of girls



“Indigenous Peoples Access to Education: Stakes and Challenges” / Photo: The Cameroon Indigenous Women Forum

from the Mbororo indigenous community were taken out of school by their parents for early and forced marriages in the last four years. During the conference, more than thirty Mbororo indigenous girls received educational school materials to prepare for the academic year. Certificates were also given to four indigenous girls who received computer classes during the holidays, offered by the Forum. The Forum continues to raise awareness about education among indigenous girls. The action plan of the Forum includes lobbying and advocacy for the promotion of education of these girls because we believe education will enable them to become independent and to take on leadership roles within the indigenous community and in wider society.

The Forum has also established a partnership with media agencies (Cameroon Radio Television CRTV, New TV, Radio Venus, STV, and Lelewal Foundation) to collaborate in broadcasting radio programs on indigenous peoples and issues that indigenous communities face. This will contribute to the dissemination of information sensitizing indigenous peoples about their rights and the opportunities available to them.

In addition, the knowledge I gained of international human rights instruments and mechanisms reinforced my leadership abilities. In July 2012, I represented the indigenous peoples of Cameroon at the 5th Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in Geneva. In September I moderated a workshop dedicated to the preparation of a report on human rights violations to be presented during the examination of Cameroon by the Human Rights Council

Universal Periodic Review that will take place in 2013. In October, I also participated in a consultation workshop with Civil Society Organizations jointly organized by the Ministry of External Relations of Cameroon and the National Commission of Human Rights in view of preparing a report to be submitted by Cameroon at the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

To conclude, I believe education and empowerment of indigenous peoples are key to addressing our problems, including marginalization. Knowing our rights better will help us take our destiny in our hands and contribute to the full realization of the rights of indigenous peoples.”

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