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## Book Review

*Growing Old in Cameroon: Gender, Vulnerability, and Social Capital.* Charles Che Fonchingong. Lanham MD: University Press of America. 2013. ISBN 978-0-7618-6125. 247 pp. \$32.99 (Paperback)

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This book delineates the lives of older people in two Anglophone regions of Cameroon, where poverty and changes in family life have made older people—and their families—more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of modern living. The author gives detailed material from his research on the daily activities and social support systems of these older Cameroonians (defined as age 60 and over) and the contributions of older people to their families and communities. As the title suggests, the information is presented through three lenses: the vulnerabilities of older people, the effects of gender on experiences in old age, and social capital as theory and practice.

The first chapter presents background material on life for aging Africans in today's world of urbanization, migration and globalization and states the research problem: "How are the elderly [in Cameroon] coping, and what policies could increase their well-being?" In the next chapter the author discusses theoretical considerations, specifically, social capital theory. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with two meanings of social security: formal pensions and informal family- and village-based arrangements or "social protection." In Chapter 5 he discusses the gender dynamics of aging in Africa. Not surprisingly, Fonchingong, like others before him—in Africa and globally—found women to be more vulnerable than men, detailing their lifetime cumulative disadvantage (though he doesn't use that term) in employment, access to pensions and home ownership, widowhood and other factors.

In the next chapter the author describes his research methods, which included in-depth interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions. Chapters 7 and 8 report his findings. Sociodemographic variables for his sample of 80 men and 50 women are presented in frequency tables in Chapter 7. This is followed with a chapter discussing various topics such as coping mechanisms, forms of reciprocity, levels of care and others, along with extensive quotations from his subjects, which bring the whole thing to life. The details concern both formal help (pensions) and family support and include consideration of the many ways older people are assets to their families and communities through activities such as child care, income generation, advising, and leadership in community building and economic development. Chapter 9 details various ways older people are proactive, building social capital and social protection through non-family village-based associations such as rotating credit societies and mutual support groups.

Finally, Chapter 10 discusses social policy implications of the research and makes policy recommendations such as government allowances for older persons who do not qualify for pensions on the basis of employment and improved health care delivery. Fonchingong expresses frustration at the Cameroon government's shortcomings which will make needed reforms difficult, if not impossible. The state, he says, "is not in tune with the labyrinth of problems plaguing the social security sector" (214), here meaning social security in the broadest sense (not just formal pension programs). He sees the need for more "semi-formal" support, involving NGOs of all kinds, faith-based organizations and village-based mutual societies and development associations. He views these organizations as pivotal to providing services needed by older Cameroonians as families' abilities to provide for their older members becomes increasingly difficult and the government fails to provide needed assistance.

Fonchingong, whose background is in social policy and social work, situates his work solidly in the literature on formal social security systems, in Africa and globally. That is appropriate given that his recommendations are aimed at policy reform. However, he ignores ethnographic research on older Africans. That is curious, since his research has a strong ethnographic turn and he could find in that literature information on some of the things he laments, such as a lack of consideration of older Africans as assets to their families and communities. Unfortunately, the book is sometimes hard to read because the writing is at times awkward and even ungrammatical. Also, there is no index, unusual for a scholarly work. Nevertheless, despite these flaws, Fonchingong's research and data analysis seem both sound and culturally grounded, making this book a useful addition to contemporary research on aging in sub-Saharan Africa.