The South West / North West Women’s Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women’s Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) are two peace networks formed by women peacebuilders and activists to unite women in responding to Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis, which many of them view as a manifestation of violent extremism and which has been—controversially—labeled by the Cameroonian government as terrorism. The networks advocate for a “third” narrative to the crisis that centers universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality. In Cameroon’s Far North, the work of Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA) supports the establishment of local peace networks to respond to the violence and terror inflicted by Boko Haram.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach, this case study discusses how Cameroonian conflict actors have systematically targeted, excluded, and co-opted women and radicalized men to promote a patriarchal culture of violence and militarism. It considers the role of women-led peace networks as a source for challenging structural inequality, maintaining collective agency, and providing support in the face of risk and threats.

Cameroon is challenged by growing instability in its Far North region because of violent extremist Boko Haram activity thought to be spillover from neighboring Nigeria. In the country’s North West and South West regions, longstanding socio-economic grievances and political marginalization of Cameroon’s Anglophone population by the Francophone-dominated government sparked protests in October 2016. The escalation of violence between armed Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces has had devastating social and humanitarian consequences. Conflict actors on both sides use identity-based grievances, hateful speech, and divisive labeling to radicalize primarily young Cameroonian men into joining networks of extreme violence.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email info@icanpeacework.org.

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible here.
Armed group conflict and violent extremist conflict necessitate similar counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), peacebuilding, and development responses grounded in values of peace, inclusivity, human rights, and pluralism. While different in nature, the root causes of these types of conflict share commonalities, such as marginalization, identity-driven propaganda, and escalation in response to counterinsurgency interventions. Hateful and divisive speech entrenches identity-based divisions, creates in-network unity, and escalates cycles of violence. The term “terrorist” can be used to legitimize use of force against an identity group and may create a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more groups of people are treated like terrorists, the more they are incentivized to upgrade their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups. Labeling a conflict as terrorism can be counterproductive, as it increases stigma, constrains avenues for dialogue and mediation and can harden the position of a group vis-à-vis their external environment. Equating masculine identity with violence facilitates the radicalization of men and boys to militant activity. Militarism and patriarchy go hand in hand, and together create an enabling environment for violence, oppression, and erasure of women.

CT and CVE interventions that support women’s peace networks allow for overcoming identity divisions and redirecting focus towards challenging the larger systems of inequality at the root of conflict and violent extremism. In a conflict environment where women’s voices are unheard and excluded, women’s networks, societies, associations, and protest movements enable them to gain collective power and take up space in the public realm.

Members of women’s peace networks draw on their gender identity, strategic communication, and code-switching abilities to gain trust and access to conflict, government, and community spaces. CT and CVE interventions should consider the primacy of trusted local actors in navigating complex conflict dynamics.

Women peacebuilders need protection. They face a high level of risk due to their frontline work and perception of “betraying” both sides of a conflict. Women’s peace networks, national and transnational, are essential for providing protection, psychosocial support, and motivation to their members. In addition to providing avenues for advocacy and activism, women’s networks act as support systems by offering strength and security in numbers.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Armed group conflict and violent extremist conflict necessitate similar counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), peacebuilding, and development responses grounded in values of peace, inclusivity, human rights, and pluralism. While different in nature, the root causes of these types of conflict share commonalities, such as marginalization, identity-driven propaganda, and escalation in response to counterinsurgency interventions.

- Hateful and divisive speech entrenches identity-based divisions, creates in-network unity, and escalates cycles of violence. The term “terrorist” can be used to legitimize use of force against an identity group and may create a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more groups of people are treated like terrorists, the more they are incentivized to upgrade their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups. Labeling a conflict as terrorism can be counterproductive, as it increases stigma, constrains avenues for dialogue and mediation and can harden the position of a group vis-à-vis their external environment.

- Equating masculine identity with violence facilitates the radicalization of men and boys to militant activity. Militarism and patriarchy go hand in hand, and together create an enabling environment for violence, oppression, and erasure of women.

- CT and CVE interventions that support women’s peace networks allow for overcoming identity divisions and redirecting focus towards challenging the larger systems of inequality at the root of conflict and violent extremism. In a conflict environment where women’s voices are unheard and excluded, women’s networks, societies, associations, and protest movements enable them to gain collective power and take up space in the public realm.

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**CONTEXT ANALYSIS**

**Gender Dimensions of the Cameroonian Conflict: Women Unite Across the Divide**

In radicalizing men to participate in militant activity, conflict actors in the Anglophone crisis have strengthened the equation of masculinity with violence and created an environment that encourages treating women as non-human and disposable subjects. Armed groups have tortured, raped, and killed women accused of having relationships with government soldiers. They have also forced young girls to join their ranks to cook, clean, and provide sex in exchange for protection and sustenance. Government forces have similarly beaten, undressed, and allegedly raped female university students engaging in protests. In the country’s Far North, Cameroonian women are frequently kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced to marry. By recruiting and radicalizing men into an ever-expanding militant network charged with sharp identity divisions, conflict parties create an enabling environment for violence, oppression, and exclusion of women.


The Anglophone crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face high levels of structural, physical, and sexual violence.
Co-opting Gender Unity

Despite the violence committed against women in Cameroon, their roles in the conflict far exceed that of passive victims. Cameroonian women have a long history of using networks, societies, associations, and protest movements to gain collective power during times of crisis. In 2017, for instance, Anglophone women mobilized Takumbeng, a social movement that uses traditional forms of protest, often incorporating nudity, to intimidate and shame government security forces. Cameroonian conflict actors on both sides have recognized the power and value of women’s peace networks and attempted to co-opt them for their own objectives. On International Women’s Day (IWD) 2017, a significant networking, celebratory, and advocacy event observed by Cameroonian women, Anglophone separatist groups urged them to protest Francophone domination by refraining from participation. These requests for allegiances and displays of loyalty demand that women sacrifice their gender unity to support male-dominated, militaristic aims that they have had no say in determining.

South West / North West Women’s Taskforce (SNWOT), Cameroon Women’s Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) and Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA)

Cameroonian women have formed their own networks and network-building organizations for peace. These include the South West/North West Women’s Taskforce (SNWOT), a coalition of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and civil society organizations based in the North and Southwest regions of Cameroon, that advocates for peace by providing a “third narrative” to the Anglophone crisis that centers humanity and respect for the human being. The Cameroon Women’s Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) initiated the First National Women’s Convention for Peace in Cameroon in July 2021, bringing together women from all sectors of society and from all regions of the country to pledge their commitment to peace efforts and issue demands.

Cameroonian conflict actors on both sides have recognized the power and value of women’s peace networks and attempted to co-opt them for their own objectives.

to conflict stakeholders. In stark contrast to the identity-driven and militarized agendas of the conflict parties, these women-led networks transcend linguistic and ethnic divisions and advocate for universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality.

Members of both networks leverage their gender identity to collectively advocate for peace. Their knowledge of and proximity to local communities is essential for navigating the complex dynamics and spaces of the Anglophone crisis. Following the killing of Confort Tumassang in August 2020, and the Kumba school massacre in October 2020, SWNOT initiated a civil society-led women’s protest in Kumba.10 While they expected 300 women, 3,500 came out and peacefully protested. After the protest, Anglophone diaspora activists began calling from the United States, telling armed leaders to be careful since the presence of Anglophone women protestors showed their struggle had failed.11 SNWOT has also negotiated with separatist groups and government forces to enter active conflict zones in order to provide medical, WASH, and psychosocial support to internally displaced persons.

While their gender identity enables SWNOT and CAWOPEM members to engage in dialogue and mediation, it also exposes them to a high level of risk. Because they are perceived of being in the middle, network members have been targeted and attacked by parties on both sides of the conflict. The need to be constantly alert and aware of their environment, and living in perpetual fear, carries a large psychological cost.12 Given these risks, the networks also have an important function as support systems for protection and encouragement. Working and marching alongside other women provides strength and safety in numbers. Following a threat or attack, network members write messages of support to each other, give advice, and offer motivating words.

Women-led organizations in Cameroon’s Far North region are engaged in their own network-building to strengthen gender-sensitive responses to the Boko Haram crisis. One such organization, ALDEPA focuses on establishing associations and clubs that sensitize communities about Boko Haram’s activities to prevent recruitment and support reintegration and rehabilitation. For instance, ALDEPA has founded groups for female survivors of trauma at the hands of Boko Haram and internally displaced (IDP) women. To bridge divisions between these women and their host communities, ALDEPA engages them in social cohesion and community service activities such as cleaning of the host community village to build goodwill and cultural exchanges where IDP women and women from host communities prepare and share food from their regions together.13

The narratives of women-led networks prioritize human security and welfare and center respect for the human being.

Women-led networks transcend linguistic and ethnic divisions and advocate for universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality.

The gendered responses of women-led peacebuilding and development organizations to the Boko Haram and Anglophone crises share many commonalities: finding unity in organizing and network-building, advocating for core values of peace, inclusivity, and pluralism, and strategic deployment of gender identities and female leadership to bridge divisions. Women peacebuilders and women-led organizations from the Far North, North West and South West regions frequently convene to discuss approaches and share best practices. Their collaboration demonstrates that, while sometimes necessary to distinguish the nature and root causes of different conflicts, labels such as violent extremism and terrorism are not always useful at the grassroots level and may constrain or confuse collaboration on responses. Approaching the conflict through a gendered extremism lens would enable women peace actors to better understand and address the role of identity in the conflict, particularly the role of hate speech and the connection between masculinities, militarism, and radicalization to violence on both sides.