



Country: Cameroon

Author: Rosalie Fransen

Actor:

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

Contributors:

Layout and Design - Abdelazim Saafan and Lauren Mellows

Acknowledgements:

ICAN gratefully acknowledges Esther Omam, Clotilda Andiensa Waah, Nicoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh, Caryn Dasah and Marthe Wandou for their collaboration on developing the case study, and Global Affairs Canada for their financial support and feedback. We also thank Sanam Naraghi Anderlini and Melinda Holmes for their review and editorial support.

Suggested citation for case study:

Rosalie Fransen, 'Courage in the Crosshairs: Women in Cameroonian Peace and Conflict Networks,' International Civil Society Action Network, September 2022.

CASE STUDY

COURAGE IN THE CROSSHAIRS: WOMEN IN CAMEROONIAN PEACE AND CONFLICT NETWORKS

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

SUMMARY

The South West / North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) 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. The case study will also discuss the work of Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA) in establishing networks to respond to the Boko Haram violence in Cameroon's Far North.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² 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 and violent extremism in its Far North region, a result of violent 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 perceptions of political marginalization of Cameroon's Anglophone population by the Francophone-dominated government sparked protests in October 2016.³ The escalation of violence between armed Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces has brought the country to the brink of civil war with 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 perpetrating 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](#).
 3. Crisis Group (2017). Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads. ([access here](#)).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 

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

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 and constrains avenues for dialogue and mediation.
- 

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.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

For six years, Cameroon has been beset with identity-driven violent conflict between Anglophone militant groups and government security forces. Termed the “Anglophone crisis,” the roots of the conflict date back to 1961 when formerly British Southern Cameroon joined independent French Cameroon to attain independence. Since then, residents of the Anglophone territories say they have suffered economic, cultural, and political marginalization and discrimination at the hands of the majority-Francophone government, blaming its heavy-handed assimilation campaign for provoking deep grievances and instigating a “perpetual political crisis.”⁴ ⁵ Meanwhile, in Cameroon’s Far North, Boko Haram’s growing presence has incited a humanitarian crisis that has forced over 322,000 people from their homes since 2014.⁶ The violent extremist group carries out regular attacks of terror including assassinations, kidnappings, bombings, and acts of gender-based violence.

In 2016, Anglophone lawyers’ and teachers’ unions took to the streets in a series of peaceful protests, decrying the appointment of French-speaking judges, teachers, and prosecutors to schools and courts in Anglophone regions.⁷ The government took a heavy-handed response to the protests by imposing internet black-outs and deploying armed police to arrest, imprison, and in some cases use deadly force against activists and protestors.⁸ This incited an escalating series of violent clashes and resulted in the emergence of armed separatist groups fighting for a new “Republic of Ambazonia.”⁹ Today, both sides wage campaigns of terror, committing severe human rights abuses including kidnappings, extra-judicial killings, torture, rape, and gender-based violence.¹⁰ Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, at least 750,000 people have been displaced, and 80% of schools in the Anglophone region are closed due to school boycotts enforced by separatist groups.¹¹

4. Mates, R. (2019). Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: Analysis of the Political, Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact. *Studia Europaea*, Vol. 64, Issue 2. ([access here](#)).
 5. Halle, E. (2014). The Force of Argument’ and the Fight for an Anglophone Identity in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).
 6. Reliefweb (2021). Cameroon: Boko Haram Attacks Escalate in Far North. ([access here](#)).
 7. Orock, R. (2021). Cameroon’s authoritarianism fuels its Anglophone separatist war. ([access here](#)).
 8. Amnesty International (2016). Cameroon: Excessive force that led to deaths of protesters must be urgently investigated. ([access here](#)).

9. Agwanda, B. and Yasin Asal, U. (2021). The Anglophone problem in Cameroon: The change from crisis to conflict, and a possible way forward to resolution. Accord. ([access here](#)).
 10. Kewir, J. et al. (2021). Shrinking Civic Space and the Role of Civil Society in Resolution of Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon. ([access here](#)).
 11. Ibid.



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

“Franco-frogs” and “Anglo-fous”: The Role of Labels in Reinforcing Identity Divisions

Amid the crisis, armed separatist groups – variously referred to as freedom fighters, radicals, or Amba-boys – espouse an ideology grounded in identity-based grievances, a hopeful revolutionary vision, and vengeance that radicalizes primarily young Cameroonian men into networks that perpetrate extreme violence and reinforce in-group identity. They are supported by strong diaspora networks in the United States, United Kingdom, Nigeria, and South Africa, who have played a crucial role in garnering support for the Anglophone cause by mobilizing in protest in their own countries, spreading propaganda on TV, blogs, and social media, and directly commanding and funding separatist groups.¹² In addition to anger around socioeconomic marginalization, separatist ideological narratives and media discourse invoke a sense of alienation and loss of cultural identity. They tap into a desire for belonging and homeland by sketching a hopeful vision of Ambazonia as a utopian place of plenty that Anglophones must commit to protecting.¹³ Revenge is another core motivating factor for radicalization to violence, with separatists pointing to atrocities committed by government troops to rally young men to join their cause.

Hateful and divisive speech, including on social media, plays an important role in entrenching identity divisions and in-network unity in the conflict. Separatist groups and their supporters refer to Francophones and government security forces as “animals” or “Franco-frogs.”¹⁴ The term “Black leg” which means sell-out or traitor is used by Anglophone armed groups to refer to fellow Anglophones

Cameroon’s anti-terror law has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the Cameroonian government treated Anglophone protestors as terrorists, the more they upgraded their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups.

perceived as opposing the separatist vision and has, in some cases, led to kidnappings, maimings, and killings of those labeled as such.¹⁵ Inflammatory speech deployed by supporters of the Francophone military includes the term “Anglo-fous” (“Anglo-crazies”) and stating Anglophones are “a gauche” (“on the left,” not worthy of anything), invoking colonial prejudices against Anglophones as uncivilized, inferior, and primitive. Francophone authorities have called on Anglophone elites to “tame their dogs,” referring to the Anglophone protestors, threatening that they will face the “wrath of the security forces” if they fail to do so.¹⁶ The term with the most far-reaching violent consequences is “terrorist,” used by the government since the start of 2016 to demonize Anglophone activists and legitimize the use of force against them. Under Cameroon’s anti-terror law, government authorities can detain those accused of terrorism without trial, adding an additional element of intimidation and fear to the term. Unfortunately, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the Cameroonian government treated Anglophone protestors as terrorists, the more they upgraded their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups.

12. Orock, R. (2021). Cameroon’s Separatist War: Anglophone Grievances and its Diaspora. ([access here](#)).

13. Doho, G. (2020). From literary concept to self-proclaimed state: three generations of Anglophone-Cameroonians at war. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 14(2), 216–235. doi:10.1080/21674736.2020.1717

14. PeaceTech Lab (2018). *Social Media and Conflict in Cameroon: A Lexicon of Hate Speech*. ([access here](#)).

15. Ibid.

16. Abah, I. (2017). Yaounde-based Anglophone Elite Fail To Tame Their ‘Dogs.’ Cameroon Post. ([access here](#)).

Unlike the Boko Haram insurgency in Cameroon's Far North, the Anglophone crisis is not typically understood as a violent extremist conflict. While not connected ideologically or operationally, the Boko Haram and Anglophone conflicts share a similar structure: radicalization to violence is facilitated by sentiments of repression and marginalization, fueled by identity-driven propaganda promising a new homeland (or, in Boko Haram's case, restoration of a Caliphate), and escalated in response to government counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism responses.¹⁷ Consequently, members of women-led peace networks in both the Far North and the North West and South West regions view their peacebuilding responses as equally applicable and relevant to the Anglophone crisis and to Boko Haram. The case of Cameroon illustrates how labeling conflicts and conflict actors as "terrorist" and "violent extremist" can be constricting and even harmful, obscuring how the root causes of armed conflict and extremist violence are often interlinked and necessitate similar peacebuilding and development responses.

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

The ideology and practices of both Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces in Cameroon are highly male-dominated, militaristic, and patriarchal. Women have largely been excluded from decision-making structures on either side of the conflict. Despite stating that their actions reflect the will of the Anglophone people in Cameroon, separatist groups did not seek the opinion of women in shaping the vision of Ambazonia as a new homeland.¹⁸ Yet, predictably, the crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face high levels of structural, physical, and sexual violence. The majority of the internally displaced person (IDP) population – estimates range from 51 – 68% - are women, who suffer not only displacement but also hostility and stigma from their host communities.¹⁹ ²⁰ Women with intersecting marginalized identities, such as indigenous women, face additional discrimination and degradation based on their ethnicity and economic class.²¹ Women have been refused access to their farms, markets, and sources of livelihood. The Cameroonian state and its forces, for their part, also remain overwhelmingly patriarchal. Women have little political power in Cameroon due to misogynistic cultural beliefs about their lack of competency as leaders and decision-makers.²² State-led attempts at reconciliation, such as the 2019 Cameroon Grand National Dialogue, have been non-inclusive of women's experiences and saw low representation of women from the Anglophone region.

In radicalizing men to participate in militant activity, Cameroonian conflict actors have strengthened the equation

of masculinity with violence and created an environment that encourages treating women as non-human and disposable subjects. For men brought up with patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs, the conflict environment and its weaponization of identity offers an excuse for acting on their impulses. Armed groups have tortured, raped, and killed women accused of having relationships with government soldiers.²³ They have also forced young girls to join their ranks to cook, clean, and provide sex in exchange for protection and sustenance.²⁴ Government forces have similarly beaten, undressed, and allegedly raped female university students engaging in protests.²⁵ Although female combatants exist,²⁶ most women are not actively fighting in the conflict, and their perceived lack of action and allegiance leaves them vulnerable to being termed "black legs," or accused of betrayal by actors on both sides. Similar misperceptions of women's roles in conflict exists in the country's Far North, where Cameroonian women are frequently kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced to marry. One young woman who was kidnapped, married off, and widowed three times was declared an "ill omen" and trained to serve as a suicide bomber.²⁷ When discovered by the government with explosives on her, she was branded a terrorist and arrested.²⁸ Her story serves to illustrate that in a male-dominated conflict context the nuances of women's participation in conflict and peacebuilding are not understood, resulting in their instrumentalization by both sides.

The militarization of linguistic identity by separatist groups has led to a breakdown of the core values, practices, and traditions of that identity.

The transition to militarism has led to the breaking of age-old gendered traditions and taboos in Cameroon: the digging of graves, traditionally the exclusive preserve of men in Anglophone culture, is now undertaken by women. Pregnant women, who are subjects of protection in Anglophone culture, have been subject to attacks and violence. The militarization of linguistic identity by separatist groups has led to a breakdown of the core values, practices, and traditions of that identity. The discrimination, subjugation and dehumanization of women is not an explicit component of the ideology of separatist groups and government forces in the same way that it is a part of the ideology of violent extremist groups like Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North. Yet, 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.

17. Mbowou, C. (2020). The Unbearable Unity of Cameroon: Boko Haram and the Anglophone Secessionism. ([access here](#)).

18. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

19. Atabong, A. (2018). Women and children bear the brunt of Cameroon's conflict. Equal Times. ([access here](#)).

20. GenCap, 2019. Data on Gender Equality in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

21. Njieassam, EE. (2019). Gender Inequality and Land Rights: The Situation of Indigenous Women in Cameroon. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2019/v22i0a4907> ([access here](#)).

22. Atanga, L. (2021). Gender Ideologies, Leadership, and Development in Cameroon. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. ([access here](#)).

23. Mudge, L. (2020). Horrific Video Shows Cameroon Killing. Human Rights Watch. ([access here](#)).

24. Atabong, A. (2018). Women and children bear the brunt of Cameroon's conflict. Equal Times. ([access here](#)).

25. Crisis Group, 2017. Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads. ([access here](#)).

26. Interview with Caryn Dasah, January 2022.

27. Interview with Marthe Wandou, March 2022

28. Ibid.



Women at a protest in Kumba participate in a public lamentation to following the killing of seven children at a school in October 2022. Lamentations are cultural practices during which women publicly wail to condemn ongoing 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. Their organizing work mirrors and draws on that of women in other African countries, like Nigeria and Liberia, who have banded together in collective acts of resistance, activism, mediation, and brokering to promote peace, development, and gender equality.²⁹ 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.³⁰ These traditional networks of women, together with the contemporary networks discussed later in this case study, demonstrate women's agency and their politics of engagement. In a conflict environment where their voices are erased and suppressed, they actively take up space in the public realm to demand what they deem proper treatment and express their own vision for Cameroon.

Requests for allegiances demand that women sacrifice their gender unity – a shared identity that traverses political, linguistic, and social boundaries – to support male-dominated, militaristic aims.

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.³¹ Choosing IWD as the date for a "ghost town" protest – a general strike during which every person is required to stay at home - allowed separatist forces to make a bold statement, co-opting the political clout of women's networks. The Cameroonian state has similarly asked women's networks to support its aims. In response to the violent murder of Confort Tumassang by separatist fighters, the government called on women to conquer the separatists by denouncing all fighters in their locality.³² These requests for allegiances and displays of loyalty demand that women sacrifice their gender unity – a shared identity that traverses political, linguistic, and social boundaries – to support male-dominated, militaristic aims that they have had no say in determining.³³

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

Following the exclusion of women's voices from conflict networks and building on Cameroon's rich history of movement-building and peaceful resistance, Cameroonian

29. Steady, F. (2006). Women and Collective Action in Africa. ([access here](#)).

30. Fonchingong, C. (2007). Crossing Rural-Urban Spaces: The Takumbeng and Activism in Cameroon's Democratic Crusade. ([access here](#)).

31. Mougoué, J. (2018). Gender and (Militarized) Secessionist Movements in Africa: An African Feminist's Reflections ([access here](#)).

32. Kindzeka, M. (2020). Cameroon Women Protest Insecurity, Gruesome Murder of Civilians. VOA News. ([access here](#)).

33. Mougoué, J. (2018). Gender and (Militarized) Secessionist Movements in Africa: An African Feminist's Reflections ([access here](#)).

women have formed their own networks for peace. Two such networks and one network-building organizations are covered in this case study: the South West/North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT), the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) and Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA).³⁴ The SWNOT is a coalition of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and civil society organizations based in the North and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The SWNOT advocates for peace by providing a "third narrative" to the Anglophone crisis that centers humanity and respect for the human being.³⁵ 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 – non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, businesswomen, soldiers, peace activists, and many more – and from all regions of the country to pledge their commitment to peace efforts and issue demands to conflict stakeholders. These demands included the end of fighting, pursuit of dialogue, women's equal participation in the peace process, provision of psychosocial support, and initiation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes.³⁶ In designing the convention, a decision was made to not address one particular crisis (i.e., Anglophone or Boko Haram), but rather to unite women to stand together for peace across Cameroon.

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. Their narratives prioritize human security and welfare: per Clotilda Andiensa Waah of the Center for Advocacy in Gender Equality and Action for Development (CAGEAD), "you can claim you are fighting to separate or unite Cameroon but you cannot claim that you are fighting to give me a brighter future if you cannot protect me." The networks stand in opposition to militarism and protest the use of hateful, extremist, and divisive speech in the conflict by calling for a "linguistic ceasefire," in the words of Nicoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh of Pathways for Women's Empowerment and Development (PaWED).³⁷ In doing so, they challenge the larger systems of inequality at the roots of conflict and violent extremism. The networks provide a platform for diverse and disparate women's groups to find common ground and maintain gender unity and collective agency in the face of discrimination, exclusion, and co-option. Jointly, they grow their credibility and advocate for greater recognition of the roles and rights of women in peacebuilding and CVE.

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



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

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. Through skilled communication and trust-building, the SWNOT negotiated with separatist groups and government forces to enter active conflict zones in order to provide medical and psychosocial support, dignity kits, and wash items to internally displaced persons.³⁸ Since women and their perspectives are largely excluded from the conflict, it was easier for SWNOT members to be perceived as neutral actors. 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.³⁹ While they expected 300 women, over 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.⁴⁰ Since the protest and the diaspora response, killings of women have come to a halt, a lockdown was cut short, and separatist fighters have ceased actively targeting and using violence against women. These incidents reinforce the power of women's peace networks to transform extremisms and disrupt radicalization to violence by strategically deploying their gender identity.

By drawing on their identity, SWNOT and CAWOPEM members can strategically navigate both government and community spaces, collectively as well as individually in their own peacebuilding and development work. With the government, they refer to legal instruments such as Cameroon's Constitution and its National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. In mobilizing Cameroonian women in the nation's capital, the CAWOPEM brought community members to the seat of government to issue their collective call for peace. Working with their communities, network

34. This section is written based on four interviews with female Cameroonian civil society leaders who have participated in one of, or both networks.

35. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

36. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2021). Cameroon's First Women's National Peace Convention: "We Build Peace, Piece by Piece." ([access here](#)).

37. Interview with Nicoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh, January 2022.

38. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2021). "Let us go where the guns are loud": How Esther Omam Builds Peace in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

39. Human Rights Watch (2020). Cameroon: Gunmen Massacre School Children. ([access here](#)).

40. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

members use less technical language and instead invite discussion on what maintaining peaceful communities might look like and require.⁴¹ Clotilda Andiensa Waah explained that her gender identity and her background as a teacher helps her to communicate with men and boys engaged in the conflict by addressing them as her children and her friends: "I tell them that while anger and grievances might be legitimate, fighting to hurt others and make others suffer is paradoxical (...) I am from the grassroots so I use a language all of them understand, cautioning them to put humanity at the center of their actions."

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. Esther Omam of Reach Out Cameroon, a founding member of the SWNOT, has been the subject of a myriad of threats and attacks from both the government and separatist groups, including the kidnapping of family members and staff and the burning of her organization's vehicle. Because they are perceived of being in the middle, network members risk being seen as traitors by those 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 and in the cases of some network members has led to burnout and depression.⁴² Given the physical and psychosocial risks of their work, 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. In a tense and divided conflict environment, networks like the SWNOT and CAWOPEM are critical not only for initiating, but also for sustaining the difficult and risky work of building peace and preventing violent extremism.

In addition to networks such as the SWNOT and CAWOPEM, 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 Cameroonian 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. Participants include internally displaced women forced into marriage, victims of gender-based violence, and women whose husbands or children were killed or disappeared. To mitigate stigma and bridge divisions between these women and their host communities, ALDEPA engages them in social cohesion and community service activities. These include cleaning of the host community village by IDP women to build goodwill and a cultural exchange where IDP women and women from host communities prepare and share food from their regions together.⁴³

ALDEPA has also founded the Counter-Violence Women's Association (CVWA), a network of female community

leaders who are identified by the respect and status they hold in their communities. These women receive training in negotiation, mediation, the origins and consequences of violent extremism, and peacebuilding strategies – skills they take back to their communities. Due to their close local ties, members of the CVWA are aware of which families have children or relatives who are involved with Boko Haram. Following their training, they speak to these families and provide information on what to do if someone tries to recruit them.⁴⁴ CVWA members also engage local actors such as traditional chiefs and the civilian-led vigilance committees created by the government. When a member of the community becomes associated with Boko Haram, CVWA members encourage positive communication with the individuals to encourage them to return to their communities, instead of immediately calling the police. In doing so, they stand against punitive, divisive measures and open the door to peaceful rehabilitation and reintegration. ALDEPA also trains networks of young girls to recognize "red flags" in relationships, to resist recruitment from Boko Haram boys who lure them with expensive gifts.⁴⁵

Labels such as violent extremism and terrorism are not always useful at the grassroots level and may constrain or confuse collaboration on responses.

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. Strengthening responses to extreme violence will require them to maintain unity and collaboration in their networks and advocate for a "third" narrative to the conflict that not only promotes shared humanity, but also instills respect for differences, celebrates plural identities, and challenges larger systems of inequality that drive grievances.

41. Interview with Ncoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh, January 2022.

42. Interview with Clotilda Andiensa Waah, January 2022.

43. Interview with Marthe Wandou, March 2022

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.