

Female Networks for Peace in Cameroon's Anglophone War: Local Female Leaders Using their Role as “Mothers” to Build Peace Amidst Ongoing Conflict

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Abstract: The English-speaking side of Cameroon has remained torn apart by a deadly war between government security forces and secessionist militias since 2016. Despite ongoing conflict, in August 2017, Cameroon produced a National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325, the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda. The plan aims at ending war and preventing gender-related violence. However, almost a decade on, the plan remains unimplemented. Protecting and empowering women seems not to be a priority for both belligerent parties. In the midst of the chaos, women have taken steps to reduce violence related to the Anglophone Crisis. They are networking as women and increasing women's social influence, active presence and recognition. On April 16, 2026, Pope Leo XIV visited the conflict-ridden town of Bamenda where he held a meeting for peace with the local community. Leo XIV praised the local lay and religious women for their non-violent activism and their contribution in building an environment that promotes peace. In analyzing their activities, this paper argues that these female peacebuilding networks lean particularly into their socio-cultural role as mothers in ways that help them decrease violence and improve the conditions for the implementation of Cameroon's Action Plan for UNSCR 1325.

SINCE 2016 THE ENGLISH PART OF CAMEROON THAT INCLUDES the Northwest and the Southwest regions has been beset with identity driven war between anglophone separatist militias and Cameroonian defense forces affiliated to the current political regime in power since 1982. It is not a civil war between anglophones and francophones living in Cameroon. It is rather a conflict between secessionist groups and the Cameroonian political regime and army. All the mass killings and violent clashes are restrained within anglophone regions and nearby towns. Other cities

and regions in the country like Yaoundé and Douala¹ are actually safe, although the conflict in anglophone regions has had a detrimental impact nationwide. Amidst the actual entanglement of the conflict, some groups of women have taken meaningful and daring steps towards peace. To date, two major women's peace movements have emerged in Cameroon: the Southwest/Northwest Women's Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM).

This paper analyzes the activities and initiatives of both peace movements. The paper argues that, given their socio-cultural context, women in these movements creatively build on their social role as mothers to foster a culture of respect for women and nonviolence which is necessary to implement Cameroon's National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325. Overall, the paper pursues two goals. First, it shows the crucial agency and role of women in wartime, especially in times where conflict stakeholders fail to adhere to the requirements of UNSCR 1325. Second, it echoes Léocadie Lushombo's insights that non-violent women-led activities can counter grave assaults on human life and dignity in intrastate armed conflicts.²

The paper contains four main parts. The first part gives an update about the conflict and highlights how both belligerent parties have plunged the conflict into a stalemate. The second part describes and discusses the current state of affairs regarding UNSCR 1325 in the context of the war in Cameroon. The third part analyzes the women's nonviolent response to the conflict in line with contemporary Catholic social teaching on peacebuilding and just peace ethics. This part seeks to illustrate how female leaders in anglophone regions have been actively involved in peacemaking activities through a persuasive narrative anchored both in Catholic peacebuilding and in the traditional role of women as mothers in African societies. The fourth and final part addresses two challenges about the activities led by SNWOT and CAWOPEM. This part confronts but does not invalidate the paper's argument. It hinges on Susan Hayward's thesis that women could also be perpetrators of violence, and not merely passive victims or non-violent activists.³ The methodology of the paper relies on on-

¹ Yaoundé is the capital city, and Douala is the industrial and economic town.

² Léocadie Lushombo, "Virtue-Based Just Peace Approach and the Challenges of Rape as a Weapon of War: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo," in *A Just Peace Ethic Primer: Building Sustainable Peace and Breaking Cycles of Violence*, ed. Eli S. McCarthy (Georgetown University Press, 2020), 227, [jstor.org/stable/j.ctv_xw3p8g.17](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv_xw3p8g.17).

³ Susan Hayward, "Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer et al. (Oxford University Press, 2015), 311, doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731640.013.0012.

the-ground observation and available online resources and documents concerning the war in anglophone regions.⁴

THE WAR IN ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON: ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

David Kwon has argued that every war is different and has its own uniqueness.⁵ Likewise, Lushombo and other just peace ethicists recommend looking at root causes while investigating and analyzing a war or armed conflict.⁶ The conflict in English-speaking Cameroon is indeed distinct, with remote root causes.

The conflict originated soon after the independence of Cameroon was proclaimed on January 1, 1960. In 1961, what was then British Southern Cameroon joined French Eastern Cameroon to attain independence and to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. However, in the aftermath of the unification of the two “Cameroons” in 1972 (the Federal Republic of Cameroon becoming henceforth the Republic of Cameroon), citizens and residents in English-speaking towns have been complaining that they are suffering economic, political, and linguistic marginalization and discrimination from the majority-francophone government.⁷

In 2016, a union of lawyers and teachers in the anglophone regions launched a series of non-violent protest marches denouncing and decrying the appointment of francophone teachers, judges and prosecutors to schools and courts in English-speaking cities. The Cameroonian government reacted violently against these non-violent demonstrations, imposing internet blackouts and deploying armed police who went as far as using lethal force to neutralize and deter subsequent activists and protesters.⁸ This situation generated an unprecedented and escalating flow of brutal clashes between government security forces and the anglophone population. These clashes in turn paved the way for the emergence of an armed secessionist militia

⁴ Cameroon is my native country. I was born in the French-speaking city of Douala, which is the economic hub of the country. In July 2025, together with other Jesuit priests, I travelled to the town of Bamenda to notice for myself the extent of the damages that the war has caused. Although I did not get the opportunity to talk directly to the leaders of the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM, I had regular interactions with other people who are involved in both networks for peace.

⁵ David Kwon, *Justice After War* (Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 8.

⁶ Lushombo, “Virtue-Based Just Peace,” 227.

⁷ Rosalie Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs: Women in Cameroonian Peace and Conflict Networks,” International Civil Society Action Network, September 2022, 2, icanpeacework.org/resources/courage-in-the-crosshairs-women-in-cameroonian-peace-and-conflict-networks.

⁸ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 2.

whose overall aim is to completely part ways with the francophone government to create a newly independent Republic of Ambazonia.⁹

In addition to rebellion over economic and political discrimination, secessionists' narratives and media discourse seek to retrieve a cultural identity. They nourish the desire for a new homeland by "sketching a hopeful vision of Ambazonia as a utopian place of plenty that Anglophones must commit to protecting."¹⁰ Today, both secessionist groups and government security forces have committed acts of terror and severe human rights violations, ranging from kidnappings to extrajudicial killings, rape and torture.¹¹

Armed separatist commanders, usually known as "freedom fighters" or "Amba boys," have engaged in propaganda campaigns that emphasize identity-based grievances, in-group ideology, and revenge for the atrocities perpetrated by government troops and the army.¹² To enforce their resistance against the government, separatist groups impose lockdown and ghost town operations within anglophone towns. These operations are strikes, partly spontaneous and partly coordinated, by secessionists on shops, taxis and schools. They can last from one to five working days where no movement within or out of the anglophone regions is possible.¹³

Currently, the "Monday strike" has become a way of life in conflict areas that is observed by businesses and even government offices.¹⁴ A key component in the endurance of the conflict is that separatist groups receive significant funding from diaspora networks spread across the globe. These networks finance the armed resistance as well as spread propaganda through their privately owned television outlets, blogs and other social media.¹⁵

⁹ On October 1, 2017, secessionists actually proclaimed the "Republic of Ambazonia," a Republic that united both the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. Government authorities in Yaoundé reacted with a heavy-handed crackdown against those they believed to be separatist sympathizers, arresting and sometimes killing many among them.

¹⁰ Fransen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 3.

¹¹ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict," i–ii, [crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/rebels-victims-peacebuilders-women-camerouns-anglophone-conflict](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/rebels-victims-peacebuilders-women-camerouns-anglophone-conflict).

¹² Fransen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 3.

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 4.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 4.

¹⁵ In September 2025, a federal grand jury in Minnesota charged two naturalized US citizens with organizing and funding kidnappings and killings in their native country, Cameroon. The defendants allegedly used the United States as a base of operations to direct bombings and killings in anglophone regions in Cameroon. Ernesto Londono, "Leaders of African Separatist Movement Indicted in Minnesota," *New York Times*, September 7, 2025, [nytimes.com/2025/09/05/us/african-separatists-indicted-minnesota-ambazonia-cameroon.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/05/us/african-separatists-indicted-minnesota-ambazonia-cameroon.html).

On the other side of the conflict, government authorities and security forces have urged anglophone secessionists to drop their weapons and guns and to surrender. They have referred to secessionists as “terrorists” threatening the stability and unity of the whole country. The word “terrorist” had been used by government authorities since the start of 2016 to legitimize and justify the use of lethal force against anglophone secessionists.¹⁶

Under Cameroon's anti-terrorism law, government officials have detained some anglophone leaders without trial and keep dispatching military to the anglophone regions.¹⁷ However, the more the Cameroonian government uses lethal force, the more secessionists upgrade their skills and tactics and retaliate with an equally destructive power.¹⁸ The persistent commitment of the two belligerent parties to use lethal and armed force has plunged the conflict into an impasse.

UNSCR 1325 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON

The conflict has profoundly disrupted the daily living of innocent civilians. Given the estimates, over 250 villages have been destroyed, nearly six hundred thousand people have been displaced, and seven thousand people have lost their lives.¹⁹ The majority of the internally displaced population are women, who suffer not only displacement, but also harassment and gender-related violence.²⁰

¹⁶ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 3.

¹⁷ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 3.

¹⁸ For example, in October 2020, government defense forces initiated what was called “Operation Bamenda Clean.” The operation aimed at intensifying security cordons in the city with the hope of neutralizing some “Amba boys.” However, this operation proved unsuccessful as security forces faced equally intense militant attacks days later. International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 4. Besides the armed confrontation, the two belligerent parties have embarked on a “linguistic war.” Separatists refer to government authorities and security forces as “franco-frogs”; whereas francophone military designate secessionists as “anglo-fous” (literally “anglo-crazy”). Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 3. This linguistic or verbal war only exacerbates armed tensions between the two belligerents whose interests are at odds with each other. For instance, government officials continue to consider secessionists as terrorists, urging them to drop the guns and to surrender. In turn, separatists’ leaders boldly challenge government authorities to recognize their independent and self-proclaimed Republic of Ambazonia.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 5.

²⁰ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 4.

Gender-based violence

The ghost town and lockdown operations enforced by armed separatists as well as curfews imposed by government security forces have exposed women and girls in anglophone regions to sexual violence, making them more vulnerable to coercion. The trauma caused by sexual assaults and the lack of humanitarian workers make the prevalence of gender-based violence hard to investigate.²¹ Many women and young girls testified that armed combatants on both sides have forced them to cook, clean and have sexual intercourse in exchange for protection.²² Some available data reveal that at least six thousand women have been sexually assaulted and raped between 2019 and 2020, with 30 percent of the victims being children.²³

Even with insufficient data from many towns and reluctance to investigate cases of rape due to psychological stigmas and socio-cultural biases, these figures are relevant and illustrate that rape is widespread. Thinking along with Lushombo, in the anglophone conflict in Cameroon, rape is used as a weapon of war and as a deliberate, systematic, strategic, and opportunistic form of sexual violence.²⁴

Human rights observers report that fighters on both sides have used rape to punish and hurt communities.²⁵ Women and young girls who have been victims of sexual violence barely get medical support because the conflict has destroyed health care facilities,²⁶ while forcing many medical practitioners to leave the conflict zones.²⁷ Hence, opportunities for care for cases of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease have greatly decreased, all while sexual exploitation, abuse, and trafficking have increased.²⁸

²¹ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 22.

²² Franssen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 4.

²³ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 22.

²⁴ Lushombo, "Virtue-Based Just Peace," 228.

²⁵ The gravest case on record occurred during a raid when government soldiers stormed the Ebam village in the Southwest region on March 1, 2020. They gathered members of seventy-five households and raped many women on the row. Government and defense officials confirmed the raid but denied that army soldiers were guilty of rape. International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 22.

²⁶ For instance, unidentified gunmen have burnt hospitals in English-speaking towns from 2019 to 2021. A hospital in the city of Kumba was burnt in February 2019, and similar incidents happened in other towns: Muyuka (March 2019), Tole and Buea (October 2019), and Kikaikelaki (March 2021). Government soldiers also stormed hospitals in search of separatists seeking treatment, harming medical staffs and patients.

²⁷ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 23.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 21.

UNSCR 1325: Current State of Affairs and emergence of Female Peace Networks

UNSCR 1325, the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda, urges all parties involved in armed conflicts to end violence against women, to increase women's participation in peacebuilding initiatives, and to include a gender perspective in peace talks and agreements.²⁹ In addition, as Lushombo observes, 122 countries (including Cameroon) have signed the UN Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict.³⁰ In 1994, Cameroon ratified and endorsed the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.³¹ In August 2017, Cameroon produced its National Action Plan for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.³² The action plan was to come into effect in 2018.

The plan had a set of goals which include training about five hundred women conflict mediators, ending impunity for sexual and gender-based violence in war, preventing any more such violence, and conducting advocacy for conflict resolution and prevention.³³ The plan was written a few months before the Anglophone Crisis escalated into a violent insurrection and war. Thus, the plan did not integrate and include the possibility of lethal force in the English-speaking regions. In 2021, during the apex of the war, government officials updated the plan. Yet civil society experts note that institutional leaders and conflict stakeholders have not taken steps to implement it.³⁴

According to some civil society leaders, there are unsettled political tensions and hostilities between belligerents that complicate the implementation of the plan. For instance, a government-led effort at peace called the Grand National Dialogue took place in 2019. The organizers allegedly invited those who did not oppose the unitary state structure of the country, while excluding armed separatist leaders from the talks. The Grand National Dialogue ended up being a purely government affair, so much so that on October 1, 2019, anglophone territories under secessionist control celebrated what they called

²⁹ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1325 (2000) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th meeting, on 31 October 2000," §§ 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, UN Doc. S/RES/1325 (2000), October 31, 2000, documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n00/720/18/pdf/n0072018.pdf

³⁰ Lushombo, "Virtue-Based Just Peace," 237–238.

³¹ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 12.

³² Republic of Cameroon, "National Action Plan for the 1325 Resolution and Companion Resolutions of the United Nations Security Council on Women, Peace and Security (2018-2020)," August 2017, un.org.shestandsforpeace/files/cameroon-nap_2018-2020_english.pdf.

³³ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 12.

³⁴ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 12.

“Ambazonia’s independence day.” These tensions create a status quo and illustrate the rift between the government and secessionists,³⁵ making it hard to implement UNSCR 1325 to stop violence against civilians and women.

Additionally, there is a patriarchal baseline that structures the gender dynamics between men and women in Cameroon, which could also explain the non-implementation of the National Action Plan. Indeed, in many ethnic groups in Cameroon, women are still relegated to maternal and domestic duties, whereas men appear as decision-makers and main protectors of their households and communities. Many customary laws confer greater authority and responsibility on men in dealing with grave matters like that of ending a conflict. Hence, the participation of women in peace negotiations is considered to be politically irrelevant.³⁶ This patriarchal bias towards women became evident during the Grand National Dialogue, where conflict stakeholders overlooked women’s experience and failed to integrate a female-based perspective in their action plan for ending the war as UNSCR 1325 requires.³⁷

In aggregate, the fact is that the institutional leaders, elites and conflict stakeholders are not taking steps to implement the National Action Plan. There is no pressure on any side to overcome violence at the lower and more local levels of society.³⁸ Besides the inaction of institutional leaders and the deadlock of the anglophone war, the crisis in the anglophone regions is happening at a time when the church leaders in Cameroon, particularly the conference of Catholic bishops, struggle to fulfill their potential role as just peace mediators.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 8.

³⁶ Female political leaders and women holding public office are still underrepresented at most levels of government, whether local councils, administrative divisions or regions. International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 12.

³⁷ One controversial fact is that the Cameroonian government mandated the Ministry for Women’s Empowerment and the Family to implement its National Action Plan. However, the Ministry has little power and influence among other governmental institutions. Furthermore, the government has not included the Ministry for Women’s Empowerment and the Family in any of its efforts to respond to the anglophone conflict during the Grand National Dialogue. International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 11–12.

³⁸ On January 2, 2021, the US Senate issued a resolution calling for a ceasefire, sanctions on human rights abusers in both camps, and a discussion of the conflict at the UN Security Council. Likewise, a subcommittee of the Canadian parliament offered to be a mediator in the conflict and to facilitate talks and dialogue between separatists and government authorities. However, the Cameroonian government to a large extent has considered these initiatives as foreign interference in their internal affairs and failed to be responsive, preferring to settle the conflict on their own terms. International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 10.

The Church's Hierarchy in the Context of the War

John Paul Lederach, using the cases of the Philippines and Colombia, points out that in countries experiencing protracted conflicts where most of the population is Christian or Catholic, church leaders, mainly local bishops alongside episcopal conferences, tend to occupy a unique position for peacebuilding.³⁹ Local inhabitants often view such religious leaders as their primary and ultimate source of refuge and help in times of crisis. In such contexts, the pastoral vocation of church leaders calls for active presence and engagement with both victims and armed actors. Lederach argues that this presence and engagement come as a “praxis of necessity”⁴⁰ and primarily aim at restoring or reconstructing what has been destroyed and damaged by the cycles of violent conflict.⁴¹

The Church's Potential for Peace Mediation in Cameroon

Cameroon is predominantly a Christian country, just like the Philippines and Colombia. Following the estimates provided by the International Crisis Group, 69.2 percent of the population in Cameroon is Christian, and among them 55 percent are Catholic.⁴² As noted by the International Crisis Group, the moral authority of the church and its widespread presence in both anglophone and francophone regions give it a unique position to promote peace and reconciliation.⁴³ Moreover, the Catholic Church stands as one of the most influential institutions in Cameroon, with a vast network of educational and health institutions, including top schools and hospitals.⁴⁴ This further reinforces the role and weight of the church in national affairs.⁴⁵ However, despite these assets, the involvement of church leaders in the war has so far been ambivalent, as various sources highlight their limitations.

³⁹ John Paul Lederach, “The Long Journey Back to Humanity: Catholic Peacebuilding with Armed Actors,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Orbis Books, 2013), 27.

⁴⁰ Lederach, “The Long Journey Back to Humanity,” 52.

⁴¹ Lederach, “The Long Journey Back to Humanity,” 43.

⁴² International Crisis Group, “Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue,” *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, no. 138 (2018): 1, www.jstor.org/stable/resp31594.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, “Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis,” 1.

⁴⁴ Adama Awasom-Fru, Maturin Désiré Sop Sop, Elin Charlotte Larsson, and Sibylle Herzig van Wees, “Doctors' Experiences Providing Sexual and Reproductive Health Care at Catholic Hospitals in the Conflict-Affected North-West Region of Cameroon: A Qualitative Study,” *Reproductive Health* 19, no. 126 (2022): 2, doi.org/10.1186/s12978-022-01430-w.

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, “Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis,” 2.

The Ambivalence within the Church's Hierarchy Regarding the War

Cameroon has twenty-six dioceses spread across five ecclesiastical provinces, all under the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon (NECC).⁴⁶ Four of the five ecclesiastical provinces are French-speaking and comprise twenty dioceses. This means that there is only one ecclesiastical province with six dioceses present in the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions.

On January 11, 2025, following the Vatican's concern and entreaty to end the war,⁴⁷ the NECC issued a pastoral letter condemning the ongoing flow of lethal force and urging political stakeholders to find resolute solutions to the conflict.⁴⁸ In this letter, the bishops particularly stressed the point that "true peace is not built around graveyards but rather comes through reconciliation. The Church proclaims the Gospel of peace and invites her sons and daughters to promote dialogue as a lasting contribution to peace."⁴⁹ The bishops' statement echoed John Paul II, who had affirmed that "true peace is not the fruit of a military victory, but rather the search for solutions to the causes that triggered war" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 18).

The pastoral letter reads as a means of pressure on both belligerents to end the war. In that letter, the bishops gave absolute priority to the security of human life as a sufficient reason to initiate a process that would lead to peace. The desire to end the loss of human life caused by the use of weapons and to protect human life became the common ground from which they recognize the necessity of finding a compromise between the separatists and the government.

Nevertheless, beyond the pastoral letter, the International Crisis Group points to the ambivalence that exists at the level of the bishops concerning the war: "Not surprisingly, the six bishops of the anglophone regions express more concern about the crisis than do those in francophone areas, reflecting anger among the anglophone flock at the central government's actions and the sympathy of the clergy in

⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, "Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis," 4.

⁴⁷ The Holy See's concern to end the conflict in anglophone Cameroon gained impetus in 2020. On February 17, 2020, an international group of Roman Catholic bishops sent an open letter to the Cameroon government, while forwarding a copy of their message to Pope Francis. In their letter, those bishops condemned the brutal military repression of civilians and called for dialogue, urging all parties to cease violence and enter negotiations. Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon, "Catholic Bishops call for urgent Cameroon peace talks," *Independent Catholic News*, February 17, 2020, indcatholicnews.com/news/38940.

⁴⁸ National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, "Confiance! N'ayez Pas Peur . . . (Maccabées 6, 50), Message Des Évêques Du Cameroun," January 11, 2025, 5, missionetmigrations.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2025/01/discours-Cameroun.pdf.

⁴⁹ NECC, "Message des Évêques du Cameroun," 5.

anglophone regions for anglophone grievances.”⁵⁰ In other words, while the anglophone clergy appears more vocal and outspoken about a constructive dialogue between conflict stakeholders that could at least lead to federalism,⁵¹ the francophone clergy in its vast majority generally remain silent. This situation thus creates two different perspectives about the same crisis, making the conflict in anglophone regions look like a problem for *some* bishops (namely anglophone bishops) rather than a problem for *all* bishops. The end result is that there is a lack of a shared vision which generates a status quo within the NECC, weakens its influence over the two belligerents, and eventually undermines the collective role that church leaders could play as just peace mediators.

Interestingly, noticing the fissure within the NECC, Father Ludovic Lado, a Cameroonian Jesuit priest from the francophone region, undertook a pilgrimage for peace to denounce the ongoing deadlock of the anglophone war.⁵² Father Lado justified this initiative as follows: “I walk to pray and to advocate, on the one hand, for dialogue, justice, peace, and reconciliation in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, and on the other hand, to do penance and make reparation for the crimes against human dignity committed in these regions. I walk so that the shedding of human blood in our country may cease. I walk in solidarity with the internally displaced and the refugees of this senseless war. I walk to exorcise in myself and in us the demon of indifference.”⁵³ Indifference appeared as a key motivation for Father Lado’s pilgrimage as he perceived that the Catholic Church had so far not done enough to pressure the Cameroonian government and the separatists towards a negotiated solution to the war.⁵⁴ He stated: “The Catholic Church cannot remain

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, “Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis,” 4.

⁵¹ It should be noted that the idea of federalism runs against the interest of the Cameroonian government, whose officials, in the context of the war, seek to maintain the actual unitary state structure of the country. Besides, the vast majority of anglophone priests in anglophone regions privately support either federalism or effective decentralization. Most of them respect the church’s hierarchy and the principle that the voice of the church should be heard through the bishops. International Crisis Group, “Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis,” 5.

⁵² Father Lado is generally known for his outspoken stance against the Cameroonian government and against anything that imperils human dignity in Cameroon. He intended to walk over two hundred miles, from the anglophone town of Bamenda (in the Northwest region) to the anglophone city of Buea (in the Southwest region).

⁵³ Magdalene Kahi, “Jesuit Cleric in Cameroon Dedicates Pilgrimage to Dialogue, Peace in Anglophone Regions,” *ACIAFRICA*, October 17, 2020, aciafrica.org/news/2147/jesuit-cleric-in-cameroon-dedicates-pilgrimage-to-dialogue-peace-in-anglophone-regions.

⁵⁴ Agnes Aineah, “Cleric in Cameroon Promises to Resume Pilgrimage ‘Alive or Dead’ after Police Harassment,” *ACIAFRICA*, October 20, 2020, aciafrica.org/news/2185/cleric.

indifferent to this crisis; that would be a collective sin. When I speak here of the Catholic Church, I do not only mean bishops and priests, but also the lay faithful who attend Mass every Sunday. My faith as a Christian, a priest, a prophet, and a king forbids me from being indifferent. Our indifference has become a collective sin.”⁵⁵

In sum, individual initiatives for peace like that of Father Lado⁵⁶ corroborate Kwon’s argument that, in the case of an impasse when dissenting forces refuse to yield, ordinary civilians or non-violent civil actions do emerge to promote an environment that supports peace, thereby compensating for the inaction of high-level officials.⁵⁷

The Emergence of Local Female Networks for Peace in Anglophone Regions

In line with Kwon’s argument and Father Lado’s initiative for peace, the situation in anglophone towns has definitely motivated ordinary civilians to come together to compensate for the inaction of high-level officials and foster an environment that sustains peace. Most of these civilians are women who have not remained passive bystanders, taking advantage of the opportunities that the war created for them.

Concurring with Hayward, “While in pre-war times women’s authorities and responsibilities may have been limited to the domestic sphere, during wartime, women are compelled to take on responsibilities in the public sphere normally held by men.”⁵⁸ In anglophone regions women have indeed performed practices formerly restricted to men, for example burial rites, digging graves, and burying the dead.⁵⁹ As Hayward further highlights, “At the same time that war brings obvious suffering for women, it creates a shift in traditional gender norms and opens possibilities for women’s empowerment.”⁶⁰ In reshaping women’s roles amidst the ongoing social crisis, the anglophone conflict paved the way to the emergence of local women’s

in-cameroon-promises-to-resume-pilgrimage-alive-or-dead-after-police-harassment.

Father Lado could not complete his pilgrimage. After noticing that many people had joined him in this pilgrimage, which was gaining momentum, national law enforcement officers interrupted the march. They arrested Father Lado and detained him for a few days, accusing him of disturbing public order. He was eventually released and returned to the Jesuit community.

⁵⁵ Kahi, “Jesuit Cleric.”

⁵⁶ Father Lado’s spirit of solidarity and his desire to fulfill his Christian duty led him to initiate another peaceful project, which he called “Back to School.” This philanthropic initiative, which is still going on, aims to raise funds to support the education of internally displaced children from the crisis-affected regions of Cameroon.

⁵⁷ Kwon, *Justice After War*, 227–228.

⁵⁸ Hayward, “Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding,” 312.

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 21.

⁶⁰ Hayward, “Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding,” 312.

peace movements committed to break the cycle of violence in anglophone regions.

WOMEN'S NON-VIOLENT ACTIVISM AND THE IMPACT ON THE CONFLICT

Women in anglophone areas have organized and formed their own networks for peace such as the Southwest/Northwest Women's Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM). The SNWOT is a coalition of women human rights defenders and civil society organizations established in the Northwest and Southwest regions. The CAWOPEM is an all-inclusive movement that promotes values and accountability while bringing together women from all sectors of activities whether lay or religious, from all regions of Cameroon, and from all religious denominations, but predominantly Christian and Catholic.⁶¹ The emergence of these two peace movements reflects the will to challenge the long-standing exclusion of women's voices in conflict resolution networks by both conflict stakeholders.⁶²

More accurately, the non-violent involvement of these two female networks arises from a context of despair and helplessness, that is, a context where neither conflict stakeholders nor the church's hierarchy have succeeded in proposing a decisive agenda to end the war in anglophone regions. To use Lederach's expression, the engagement of these female activists emerges as a "praxis of necessity," as a resolute commitment to break the cycle of violence when classical or traditional just peace actors fail to do so. In essence, the SNWOT's and the CAWOPEM's non-violent activism substantiates Douglas Johnston's argument that, in present-day conflicts which overrun the boundary of "traditional diplomacy," non-violent movement activists at grassroots and national levels should get involved in peace and reconciliation.⁶³

Esther Omam, one of the most influential women within the CAWOPEM, shares that many women in the movement, lay and religious alike, "feel blessed or even chosen when they have an opportunity to fill these roles and make positive change in their communities . . . faith is the crucial element of their motivation."⁶⁴ As

⁶¹ Fransen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 6.

⁶² Fransen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 5–6.

⁶³ Douglas Johnston, "Faith-Based Organizations: The Religious Dimensions of Peacebuilding," in *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*, ed. Paul van Tongeren, Malin Brenk, Marte Hellema, and Juliette Verhoeven (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 210.

⁶⁴ Carla Schraml and Laura Anyola Tufon, "Women Faith-Based Mediators in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities Within Peace Mediation," *The Network for*

she continues, “Women feel the commandment to work for positive change, ending and preventing violence, releasing hostages, getting access to the communities, while accepting extremely difficult and endangering situations.”⁶⁵ While doing so, they begin to create a culture of respect for women and nonviolence at the grassroots level. Ultimately, in line with Johnston’s proposal to make peace-based grassroots movements more visible in academic and public spheres,⁶⁶ the SNWOT’s and the CAWOPEM’s strategies for peacebuilding require a deeper analysis in relation to contemporary Catholic social thought on peacebuilding and just peace ethics.

Catholic Peacebuilding and Female Peacebuilding Initiatives in the War

Based on recent papal documents, teachings, and statements, one could observe that contemporary Catholic social thought on peacebuilding and just peace ethics consistently departs from classical just war theory that originates from the teachings of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. As Lisa Sowle Cahill argues, although just war theory and the moral justification of the use of lethal force have never been officially repudiated, current Catholic peacebuilding gives more attention and priority to non-violent resolutions and strategies to cultivate, sustain, and restore peace in conflict-ridden societies and countries.⁶⁷

Noticeably, while Benedict XVI erected Jesus’s instruction to “love your enemies” (Matthew 5: 44; Luke 6: 27–28) as the “magna carta” of Christianity,⁶⁸ his successor, Francis, insisted on the need to seek non-violent strategies for peacebuilding. In his most articulated address on peacebuilding, Francis perceived non-violence as an effective and practical strategy that is likely to diminish lethal conflicts and violence across the world. Francis stated, “Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary complement to the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application

Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, 8, peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Cameroon-WFBM-study.pdf.

⁶⁵ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 8.

⁶⁶ Douglas Johnston, “Introduction: Beyond Power Politicism,” in *Religion: The Missing Dimensions of Statecraft*, ed. Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

⁶⁷ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Just War as a Theory, Just Peace as a Virtue,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2024): 456–470, doi.org/10.1177/09539468241257764.

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI, “Good Friday Message,” April 22, 2011, vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110422_via-crucis-colosseo.html. Benedict XVI emphasized the fact that “non-violence is not merely tactical behavior but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God’s love and power that he is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone.”

of moral norms.”⁶⁹ In the same vein, he added, “Active non-violence is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict.”⁷⁰

Following his two predecessors, Leo XIV emphasized anew the need and appeal for effective, practical, and resolute non-violent initiatives to end and prevent wars in the world. Strikingly, just after his election, his initial statement resonated both as an advocacy for a non-violent peacebuilding ethos and a pamphlet against the dominant warmongering paradigm. Leo XIV particularly stressed that true peace, which derives from the risen Christ, “is a peace that is unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering. A peace that comes from God, the God who loves us all, unconditionally.”⁷¹

Relatedly, Leo XIV inaugurated his first apostolic journey by traveling across four African countries, including Cameroon. In Cameroon, on April 16, 2026, Leo XIV visited the conflict-ridden town of Bamenda and held a massive peace meeting with the local community after secessionists announced a rare three-day ceasefire to allow safe passage.⁷² In front of an estimated twenty thousand attendees, Leo XIV reiterated his urgent call for ending the conflict through a non-violent just peace agenda built around a constructive dialogue between religious leaders, conflict stakeholders, and the local population. In this regard, Leo XIV posited:

The world is being ravaged by a handful of tyrants, yet it is held together by a multitude of supportive brothers and sisters! They are the descendants of Abraham, as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. Let us look into each other's eyes: we are this immense people! Peace is not something we must invent: it is something we must embrace by accepting our neighbor as our brother and as our sister. We do not choose our brothers and sisters: we simply must accept one another! We are one family, inhabiting the same home: this wonderful planet that ancient cultures have cared for across millennia.⁷³

⁶⁹ Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 2017, no. 6, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

⁷⁰ Francis, “Nonviolence,” no. 6.

⁷¹ Leo XIV, “First Blessing ‘*Urbi et Orbi*,’” Holy See Press Office, May 8, 2025, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2025/05/08/0299.pdf.

⁷² Joseph Tulloch, “Day Four in Africa: Pope Leo addresses Cameroon's ‘Anglophone Crisis,’” *Vatican News*, April 16, 2026, vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2026-04/pope-cameroon-bamenda-peace-meeting-anglophone-crisis.html.

⁷³ Leo XIV, “Meeting for Peace with the Community of Bamenda,” April 16, 2026, vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2026/april/documents/20260416-camerun-incontro-pace.html.

Leo XIV's ethos for peacebuilding grounded on core values of shared humanity and common family culminated in the exhortation to the entire local population to "be like oil poured out upon the wounds of [their] brothers and sisters."⁷⁴

Conversant with Leo XIV's vision of peace that is "unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering," women in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM endeavor to promote a culture of peace that adheres to recent papal appeals for a non-violent peacebuilding ethics and praxis. To achieve that task, these female leaders build on their collective expression of grief and their social role as mothers to gain moral agency and legitimacy amidst tensions and violent clashes.

Female Leaders Building on Grief for Peace Advocacy

In general, Christian virtue ethics rooted in Aquinas do assign greater value to the role of emotions in our moral agency. For instance, William Mattison argues that "emotions are not blind surges of affect but intelligible responses to particular types of situations."⁷⁵ Like Mattison, Richard Gula also asserts that our emotions are not "blind feelings or neutral outbursts."⁷⁶ Gula writes: "Emotions also connect character to action by being a source of motivation. Emotions (from the Latin *ex + movere*) literally move us out of ourselves. . . . We do things because we emotionally care about them and are personally invested; when we stop being moved, we stop moving. We need emotions to empower us, such as hope that gives us the energy to pursue what is difficult, courage to face our fears, and anger to protect what we love."⁷⁷ In the context of the war in the English-speaking part of Cameroon, beyond hope and anger, one specific emotion that stands out is grief. The conflict has decimated entire villages and towns, causing countless families to grieve and mourn the loss of their loved ones. Similarly, many women who are active in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM also experience grief due to the loss of their relatives. Unsurprisingly, the expression of grief therefore permeates their non-violent activism as evidenced in the first three paragraphs of their statement issuing their "Call for peace in Cameroon":

Many hearts, beating as one. As women, we have buried our husbands and fathers, our brothers and uncles, our sisters and daughters; we have bandaged the wounds of our sons; wept and comforted our

⁷⁴ Leo XIV, "Meeting for Peace."

⁷⁵ William Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and The Virtues* (Brazos Press, 2008), 75.

⁷⁶ Richard Gula, *Just Ministry* (Paulist Press, 2010), 50.

⁷⁷ Gula, *Just Ministry*, 54.

daughters who have been raped and battered and saved them from being used as human bombs. We hid in bushes, suffered the cold, starved for days as we ran away from guns and killings. We have been cruelly deprived of everything including our dignity as our tears fall on hardened soil while we watch our children and grandchildren as they loiter at home, unable to go to school. But, according to an African proverb, "When women move forward, the world moves with them."⁷⁸

With reference to Mattison and Gula, female activists in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM collectively express their grief not as "blind surges of affect"⁷⁹ or "blind neutral outbursts,"⁸⁰ but rather as a source of motivation and empowerment. Their grief-filled statement resonates indeed as a resolute call and advocacy for peace that motivates them to stand up, denounce the ongoing cycle of violence, and wake beligerents up from their inhumane behavior. Moreover, echoing James Keenan's understanding of grief as generating new social relationships,⁸¹ women in both networks collectively share and express their grief as a call, within anglophone regions, for new social relationships grounded on human dignity and human safety.

Female Leaders Gaining Moral Strength as "Mothers"

Many social and cultural settings in Cameroon remain patriarchal. However, as Schraml and Tufon argue, the strength of patriarchal structures differs in various parts of the country. In anglophone regions for instance, many traditional structures contain matrilinear systems that give women a crucial role within the family and the community.⁸² In these matrilinear systems, as Lushombo illustrates, the role of a woman is primarily understood in terms of motherhood. The woman is a "mother;" and in this, "she is a giver and a protector of life."⁸³ She generates and nurtures life in all ways and her mother-

⁷⁸ National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon, "Pieces of Peace," July 31, 2021, 1–2, camerounpeaceconvention.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Document-1-Convention-Call-for-Peace.pdf.

⁷⁹ Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 75.

⁸⁰ Gula, *Just Ministry*, 50.

⁸¹ James F. Keenan, *The Moral Life: Eight Lectures* (Georgetown University Press, 2023), 14.

⁸² Schraml and Tufon, "Women Faith-Based Mediators," 7–8.

⁸³ Léocadie Lushombo, "Social Motherhood and Masculinization of the Church in Bernadette Mbuy-Beya's Ethics and Philosophical Anthropology," in *African Women's Liberating Philosophies, Theologies, and Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 82.

hood transcends biological fecundity; “she is the mother of her children and the entire community.”⁸⁴

In relation to the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, women in the SWNOT and the CAWOPEM have referred to the roles the community ascribes to them to back up their engagement to end the violence in anglophone regions. As an illustration, they have resorted to the so-called “Takumbeng,” literally “the mothers of the nation,”⁸⁵ which is a social movement in the Northwest region of Cameroon. This movement incorporates elderly women who act as regulators of the community in times of crisis. In the context of war in Cameroon, the Takumbeng movement gathered as a group and utilized provocative behaviors. In a few instances, women completely undressed themselves and showed their nudity. This was a means to blame and shame perpetrators of violence. Through these actions, women expressed their concern and alerted observers to the severity of human rights violations by separatists and security forces.⁸⁶ On the whole, the foregoing explanations already help show how female leaders in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM utilize their traditional social role as mothers to build peace and break through spaces where belligerents hardly get to.

Women Leaning into their Social Roles to Promote Peace: Further Details

In a social context which customarily perceives women as “mothers,” that is, as “givers and protectors” of life, the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM creatively use this social perception and their role as mothers in ways that maximize their credibility and authority as effective peaceful and political agents. They advocate for peace and provide a discourse that aligns with Leo XIV’s vision of peace that is “unarmed and disarming.”⁸⁷ Hence, their discourse contrasts with the identity-driven and militarized agendas of the conflict belligerents.⁸⁸ They center their narratives on concerns about humanity, respect for the human being, human security and welfare. One of their ordinary maxims runs as follows: “You can claim you are fighting to separate or unite Cameroon, but you cannot claim that you are fighting to give

⁸⁴ Lushombo, “Social Motherhood,” 81, 82, 85. Commenting on Bernadette Mbuy-Beya’s philosophical anthropology of African women and based on contextual ethics, Lushombo explains that no African woman is conceived outside motherhood, whether biological or social. In other words, motherhood is the main attribute of women’s identities within certain parts of western, central, eastern, and southern Africa.

⁸⁵ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 7.

⁸⁶ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 7.

⁸⁷ Leo XIV, “First Blessing.”

⁸⁸ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 1, 6.

me a brighter future if you cannot protect me.”⁸⁹ In so doing, they endorse and substantiate Kwon’s argument that securing human safety must be achieved prior to any political or military concern.⁹⁰

As mentioned earlier on, their communication campaigns contain neutral, harmless and caring speeches or statements that emphasize their role as women, mothers, sisters, wives and the like. Recall that, in their “Call for peace in Cameroon,” female activists in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM presented themselves as “mothers, sisters, and wives” who have buried their “husbands, fathers, brothers and uncles.”⁹¹ Given that the nature of their communication emphasizes their social roles as mothers and caregivers in a social context where to be a mother is to give and protect human life, both separatist groups and government security forces consider their claims to be politically harmless. Thus, SNWOT’s and CAWOPEM’s members are perceived as non-violent activists. This allows them to organize their activities undisturbed.⁹² Some activities with significant impact in limiting and even preventing the cycle of violence in anglophone regions are known as Lamentation Campaigns. Following a school massacre in October 2020, SNWOT’s and CAWOPEM’s members launched a non-violent women-led protest in the anglophone region of Kumba. The protest centered around the following statement: “We, as mothers, gather to fight for our children and protest against the violence against our children.”⁹³

Putting forward their role as mothers, over 4500 women participated and dressed in black to protest against the violence and for reopening schools.⁹⁴ After the protest, violence against women diminished, lockdown operations were cut short, and some schools which had closed were discreetly opened.⁹⁵ The massive participation of women during the protest generated a shift in the secessionists’ policy, leading militias to stage fewer attacks on the schools that were operating.⁹⁶

The activities such as Lamentation Campaigns and the traditional roles of women illustrated through the Takumbeng movement substantiate the political potential of motherhood or women’s roles. While motherhood is often held up to confine women to the domestic space and out of public leadership, the opposite has occurred in this case. Women increase their social influence and get attention when

⁸⁹ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 6.

⁹⁰ Kwon, *Justice After War*, 189.

⁹¹ National Women’s Convention for Peace in Cameroon, “Pieces of Peace,” 1.

⁹² Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 5–6.

⁹³ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 7.

⁹⁴ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 7.

⁹⁵ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 6.

⁹⁶ International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 15.

they show up in numbers, as in the 4500 for the Lamentation Campaign.⁹⁷

Furthermore, by leaning into their role as mothers, SNWOT and CAWOPEM members also navigate both community and conflict spaces. According to a Reverend Sister active in the CAWOPEM, her identity as a Reverend Sister helps her to be perceived as a “mother,” that is, a caregiver who is less threatening. The Reverend Sister gives the following testimony: “I think men could not really talk to the [Amba] boys. At the moment, they are so stressed and agitated. I think if it was any man [trying to approach them as we, women, are doing] they would just kill him.”⁹⁸ This testimony further illustrates how, in centering their communication on their social role as mothers, women in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM build trust and negotiate with secessionists and military troops to re-open schools,⁹⁹ to enter active conflict areas and to provide medical and psychosocial assistance and dignity kits.¹⁰⁰

Overall, through their activism, the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM create a culture of respect for women and nonviolence. On this point, it is worth noting that during his meeting for peace in the town of Bamenda, Leo XIV duly commended local female movements for their active contribution in alleviating suffering within their afflicted communities. The pope noted: “I would like to express gratitude to all those, particularly the lay and religious women, who care for individuals traumatized by violence. It is an enormous task that goes unseen day by day, and . . . it is also dangerous. The masters of war pretend not to know that it takes only a moment to destroy, yet a lifetime is often not enough to rebuild. They turn a blind eye to the fact that billions of dollars are spent on killing and devastation, yet the resources needed for healing, education and restoration are nowhere to be found.”¹⁰¹ To a larger extent, Leo XIV’s reference to female peace movements, namely these “lay and religious women,” reads as a eulogy and public recognition for their work. Additionally, the pope’s allusion to them does show that, by taking dangerous steps and creative initiatives to reduce violence and care for distressed individuals, these lay and religious women do not only rebuild the social harmony disrupted by capitalist and bellicose interests as the pope highlights; they also gradually build both a culture of respect for women and a culture of peace that connects with contemporary Catholic peacebuilding and could help improve the more general

⁹⁷ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 6.

⁹⁸ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 12.

⁹⁹ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 4.

¹⁰⁰ Fransen, “Courage in the Crosshairs,” 6.

¹⁰¹ Leo XIV, “Meeting for Peace.”

social, cultural, and political conditions for the implementation of Cameroon's National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325.

CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Thus far, this paper has argued that, in the context of Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis, non-violent women-led activities can counter grave assaults on human life and help increase women's influence that is necessary to respect and implement UNSCR 1325. However, there are two main challenges that need to be discussed or addressed. The first concerns the extent and durability of women's non-violent activism. The second deals with the presence of other groups of women acting as armed fighters and victimizers.

On the Extent and the Durability of Women's Nonviolent Activism

From the activities presented and analyzed, it appears that the non-violent activism of women is effective only in limiting casualties in certain areas. Despite some signs of quietness, the war is still going on in anglophone regions and the lockdown-ghost town operations as well as curfews are still enforced by both separatist militias and government security forces.

To strengthen the criticism, one may refer to Fanie Du Toit's discussion of "agonist reconciliation." Considering the South African case, Du Toit discusses the "agonist" way of building reconciliation and peace. For him, this typology of reconciliation is an open-ended one that embraces risk and ambiguity, rather than certainty and closure.¹⁰² One of the main criticisms of Du Toit is that the agonist typology of peacebuilding is hard to evaluate and could underestimate what it takes to overcome and to end violence.¹⁰³

One could assert that the non-violent activism of women in anglophone regions corresponds more or less to the agonist typology of reconciliation and peacebuilding. Their efforts help break the cycle of violence as they embrace risks by navigating grassroots and government spaces to voice their concern for human security and peace. However, the persistence of armed violence added to the tense atmosphere still evident in anglophone towns cast some doubts regarding the extent of the women's effectiveness and the durability of their non-violent activism. In other words, it could be that women's non-violent activism in the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM has only intermittent and open-ended impacts.

¹⁰² Fanie Du Toit, *When Political Transitions Work: Reconciliation as Interdependence* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 167.

¹⁰³ Du Toit, *When Political Transitions Work*, 167.

In line with the preceding criticism, we should observe that these female activists are acting on their own, using their own material and financial resources to preserve their neutral orientation and credibility. For example, Esther Omam testifies that she traveled to the United States at her own expense to engage in mediation with secessionist leaders for the re-opening of schools. She funded her travel personally to ensure that her credibility would not be questioned by secessionist leaders. She retorts that individuals acting on their personal account are easier to get accepted by separatist leaders than agencies working through and with the Cameroonian government.¹⁰⁴

On Female Armed Fighters and Victimiziers

Hayward warns against the tendency of essentializing women as “natural peacebuilders” and argues that in times of war, they quite often act as victimizers. Indeed, women could play an active role in propelling and fueling violent activities, participating as suicide bombers and flattering men into fighting.¹⁰⁵ Kwon also conveys a similar argument. He contends that although local peacebuilders are frequently actors for peace, they could also become actors for violence in the name of justice and peace.¹⁰⁶

Contrary to the non-violent activism of the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM, other women have joined the armed revolt, acting as rebels and perpetrators of violence. According to a report from International Crisis Group, three main reasons explain their engagement as rebels. Firstly, some women are politically committed to secession. Secondly, other women joined the armed resistance only as revenge for the sexual assaults, killings and human rights violations perpetrated by national security forces. Thirdly, some other women join the armed struggle as a survival strategy.¹⁰⁷

The presence of these violent groups of women constitutes a major challenge to the nonviolent campaign led by the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM. With the presence of female rebels and victimizers, it becomes increasingly difficult for female local peacebuilders to launch their activities and to get access to local communities. Initially, by putting forward their role as mothers and caregivers, they were considered to be less threatening; now, due to the presence of female rebels, both separatist militias and national defense forces become

¹⁰⁴ Schraml and Tufon, “Women Faith-Based Mediators,” 12.

¹⁰⁵ Hayward, “Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding,” 309.

¹⁰⁶ Kwon, *Justice After War*, 228–229.

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, “Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders,” 13.

suspicious of their activities.¹⁰⁸ Many female local peacebuilding actors currently face threats and intimidations from separatists and government forces.¹⁰⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The war in anglophone Cameroon is still going on, as armed clashes and killings are still rampant in English-speaking areas. In a context where both conflict stakeholders are failing to find a just solution to end the conflict and where the bishops' conference remains ambivalent, independent women have created their own local networks for non-violent activism, namely the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM. Adopting a neutrality strategy, they creatively build on their role as mothers to break the cycle of violence. Their initiatives have yielded significant results in the reopening of schools, the decrease of mass killings, especially of children, and a decline in the rate of violence against women and girls. Their engagement thus increases women's social influence and participation that is necessary to respect and implement UNSCR 1325, and ultimately to end the war. However, there are tremendous challenges ahead. The presence of female rebels represents a serious threat to the pursuit and realization of their non-violent activities. To overcome this specific challenge, non-violent female activists appeal to the religious and faith-based nature of their movement to gain legitimacy. Many among them are Catholic believers and act through the peace and justice commissions present in some dioceses in anglophone regions. They often use local Catholic schools and parishes to organize their meetings.

At the end of his meeting for peace in the town of Bamenda, Leo XIV alongside other religious authorities and lay persons released white doves from the front steps of Saint Joseph's Cathedral in Bamenda. This action served as a profound symbol and sign of healing, reconciliation and peace in the two anglophone regions affected by the war. Leo XIV's visit was peaceful and marked by massive and jubilant crowds. In the weeks following his departure, sporadic gunfights, lockdowns, and localized violence resumed, ending the temporary three-day ceasefire called by anglophone secessionist fighters. Beyond any feeling of despair, to a greater extent, Leo XIV's Apostolic Journey to Cameroon shows that the path to ending the war and implementing Cameroon's Action Plan for

¹⁰⁸ Fransen explains that since the perspectives of women's peace networks in the conflict were politically neutral, it was easier for them to be perceived as "neutral actors" by both separatist groups and government forces. Fransen, "Courage in the Crosshairs," 6.

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, "Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders," 17.

UNSCR 1325 would require the active inclusion, participation and field experience of local female networks for peace like the SNWOT and the CAWOPEM. **M**

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