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## Women, Peace and Security in Cameroon: the missing voices of the Anglophone Crisis

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*Cameroon's civil war has marked women's lives with insecurity – facing economic, physical and sexual violence. Yet despite women's experience of the conflict, they have been left out of dialogue to bring the conflict to an end. Corinne Aurelie Moussi argues that Cameroon must honour its commitments to women's rights and shows how they have been successful agents of change who belong at the dialogue table.*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by growing calls to promote the inclusion and participation of women in peace processes as well as

recognise their unique lived experiences in wartime and peacetime. These calls have materialised in various UN resolutions which articulate the commitments made by the international community towards addressing and redressing the experiences of women. In spite of these, there exists a significant gap between rhetoric and action at national levels. The nation of Cameroon has been embroiled with a civil war and women in the affected regions have unfortunately been disregarded in terms of their inclusion in peace processes and redress for their experiences.

### **Background to the conflict**

The Anglophone civil war continues to have devastating consequences on the [civilian population with rising casualties](#). This current conflict within the borders of Cameroon has [its roots in colonial legacies and erupted following protests initiated by teachers and lawyers in 2016](#). Anglophone lawyers and teachers protested the imposition of French legal institutions and of French speaking teachers in the Anglophone regions and Anglophone schools respectively.

Other grievances included the socio-economic and political marginalisation of the Anglophone regions and people. While these protests were initially peaceful, they were met with a violent military clampdown by government armed forces. This military clampdown escalated into a conflict in 2017 between government security agents and armed insurgents from the Anglophone regions who demanded complete secession of the Anglophone regions from the Republic of Cameroon.

After much pressure from the local, regional and international communities calling for peaceful and non-militarised solutions to the conflict, the government of Cameroon agreed to host a major national dialogue with the aim of ensuring peace and national unity. [This dialogue](#)

was held from [September 30 to October 4, 2019](#) and comprised of different stakeholders.

### Where are the women?

While a national dialogue had always been advocated for in order to resolve the Anglophone conflict, the gender representation in this dialogue and the proposals which followed were not inclusive. The non-inclusiveness of women's experiences and low representation of women from the Anglophone regions and other regions of the country were striking features of this major national dialogue. This absence or exclusion are revealing of the various systems of inequality and repression that are in place and how patriarchal the Cameroonian state remains.

The conflict-related experiences of women during the Anglophone conflict warrants recognition and redress. Women in the Anglophone regions have been bearing the brunt of the conflict and within the humanitarian crisis which has ensued, women account for [51 per cent of the internally displaced populace](#). Women have been vulnerable and continue to be victims of violence and this violence ranges from economic, physical and sexual violence as well the threat of the use of such violence.

Women's lives have been marked by insecurity and in September 2020, women in Cameroon took to the streets to deplore and highlight the violent conditions women in the Anglophone regions are subjected to. The backdrop against these protests was [the tying up and slaughtering of a 34-year-old lady, Comfort Tumassang by armed separatist fighters](#) known as the 'Ambazonia boys' who allegedly considered her a traitor because of her union with a member of the government armed forces.

Comfort is not the only woman to have been killed by separatist fighters for alleged links to the government armed forces. [Mbah Florence](#) was

another woman who was brutally murdered by insurgents for allegedly aiding the government armed troops. These incidents are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the myriad forms of violations women in the Anglophone regions have been subjected to.

While women have been victims in the Anglophone crisis, they have however exercised agency. Escaping from the victimhood cloak that has often been used to blanket women in conflict, the women in the affected regions have claimed their agency by being advocates of peace as well as being activists. They have mobilised themselves through various NGOs and taskforces to bring international and local attention to the conflict and they continue to advocate for the end of this conflict.

Examples include the [South West and North West women's task force \(SNWOT\)](#) and [Women for a Change Cameroon \(WFAC\)](#). The various marches organised by women and the various women-led taskforces display women's agency and their politics of engagement. Through this politics of engagement women are actively taking up spaces in the public realm and collectively demanding what they deem as proper treatment in spite of state silence.



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## The WPS Agenda and Cameroon

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda of the United Nations has been considered as harnessing transformative change for women in war zones and post-conflict societies. Various UN resolutions make up the WPS agenda and of distinct relevance is UNSCR 1325 which is the landmark resolution of the WPS agenda. This resolution recognises the importance of understanding the consequences of armed conflict on women and girls and calls for the increased participation of women in peace processes.

While UNSCR 1325 was adopted in 2000, it was only on 16 November 2017, in a historic move that, the Government of [Cameroon adopted its first National Action Plan \(NAP\)](#) in its implementation of the United Nations WPS agenda. This adopted NAP, which covers a period of three years (2018-2020), renews and reaffirms the government of Cameroon's commitment to women in wartime. Notwithstanding this reaffirmation, women's experiences in the affected areas require immediate government action and the government of Cameroon needs to do more.

In its NAP, the government of Cameroon recognises that “[women] are [above all promoters and agents of consolidation of peace](#)”. Consequently, in light of the Anglophone conflict, the government should be honouring its vision and elements of action as stated in its NAP which call for the

leadership and participation of women in the processes of prevention and management of conflict and post-conflict situations, to construct peace and social cohesion. Secondly, as stipulated in its NAP, the government should better integrate the gender dimension in its conflict resolution and humanitarian aid initiatives aid. This has the potential of redressing and addressing the experiences and representation of women in the Anglophone war zones.



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### **The way forward**

The Anglophone crisis and its resulting dynamics in terms of the disregard of women's experiences and exclusion from national dialogues are revealing of a status quo whereby women are treated solely as subjects of patriarchal benevolence and consequently erased from public

discourses. Women's insecurity as experienced in terms of being internally displaced persons (IDP), physical assault and sexual victimisation need to be considered and redressed.

Although there is a need to acknowledge these experiences, women's contributions should not be limited or confined to their stories of pain and suffering. Women in the Anglophone regions have shown their role and influence as change-makers through the various organisations that continue to advocate for peace in the conflict-ridden areas. These taskforces should not be conflated with the patriarchal notions of women being naturally peace-loving but should be seen as a display of women as able changemakers who belong at the dialogue table.

Subsequently, as a member state of the United Nations, the government of Cameroon ought to not only ensure the increased participation and representation of women in future national dialogue initiatives, but it needs to recognise and redress the unique wartime experiences of women and girls. A willingness by the government of Cameroon to make good commitments to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 will be a big step in bringing the Anglophone conflict to an end in order to halt its resulting consequences on women and girls. Secondly by making good commitment to the WPS agenda, the government of Cameroon can redress systems of inequality which exclude women from public/state institutions.

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## About the author



Corinne Aurelie Moussi is a PhD candidate and Lisa Maskell fellow at Stellenbosch University. She was a visiting scholar at the Centre for International Criminal Justice in Amsterdam. She considers herself an African feminist and has keen research interests in women’s peacetime and wartime experiences, gender justice before international criminal institutions as well as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

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