

# Safeguarding the Rights of Women in Armed Conflicts: An Appraisal of the Armed Conflict in the Anglophone Cameroon

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## Abstract

Armed conflicts disproportionately affect women, exposing them to heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, economic marginalization, and exclusion from peace processes. This study examines the effectiveness of safeguarding the rights of women in the context of the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict. Adopting a doctrinal and qualitative research methodology, the study analyses relevant international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and regional legal frameworks alongside documented practices in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon. The findings reveal a significant gap between Cameroon's formal legal obligations and their practical implementation, resulting in persistent violations of women's rights by both state and non-state actors. The study further finds that weak accountability mechanisms, institutional fragmentation, limited humanitarian access, and the marginalization of women from peace and security initiatives have undermined effective protection. The paper concludes that safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone conflict remains largely ineffective and argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without placing women's protection and participation at the center of conflict response and peace-building efforts. The study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a context-specific legal appraisal of women's rights protection in a protracted non-international armed conflict and offers policy-oriented recommendations aimed at bridging the gap between law and practice.

**Keywords:** Anglophone Cameroon, appraisal, armed conflict, rights, women

## 1. Introduction

The protection of women's rights in situations of armed conflict is a cornerstone of contemporary international human rights law and humanitarian action. Historically, armed conflicts have deepened pre-existing gender inequalities, exposing women to heightened risks of gender-based violence, displacement, and socio-economic marginalization. International legal frameworks such as the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security explicitly recognize the need for special measures to protect women and girls during conflicts and to ensure their participation in peace-building processes.<sup>1</sup>

Since late 2017, the Anglophone regions of Cameroon comprising the North-West and South-West have been engulfed in a protracted armed conflict between separatist movements and government forces. Women in these regions have borne a disproportionate share of the conflict's toll, experiencing displacement, loss of livelihood,

<sup>1</sup> UN Women. (2015). Women, peace and security: Study on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 in Africa. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

and widespread violations of their rights, including sexual and gender-based violence. Empirical studies indicate that women and children account for the majority of survivors of conflict-related gender-based violence in the region, with cases often going unaddressed due to systemic barriers to justice and protection.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond victimization, women in the Anglophone crisis have also played diverse roles in peace-building and community resilience, despite being frequently excluded from formal negotiations and decision-making processes. Their marginalization from peace processes undermines broader efforts to achieve sustainable resolution and highlights the gap between international normative commitments and local realities.<sup>2</sup>

This study appraises measures enacted to safeguard women's rights in the Anglophone conflict, examining both the legal frameworks in place and the practical challenges to their implementation. By situating the Cameroonian context within international standards and local adaptations, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered vulnerabilities in armed conflict and offers recommendations for more effective protection and inclusion of women in peace and security initiatives.

## 2. Conceptual Clarifications

Women bear a disproportionate burden in armed conflicts, often facing violence, displacement, and denial of basic human rights. In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, ongoing hostilities have exposed women to grave human rights violations, highlighting the urgent need for effective protective measures. Understanding the key concepts of safeguarding, women's rights, armed conflict, appraisal, and Anglophone Cameroon is essential to situate this study within both legal and practical frameworks, and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at protecting women in conflict settings.

### 2.1 Safeguarding

Safeguarding in legal and human rights practice refers to measures, policies, and mechanisms that protect individuals from harm, abuse, or violations of their rights. In conflict contexts, safeguarding women requires ensuring that humanitarian and legal protections are effectively applied to prevent abuses and uphold human dignity.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2 Women's Rights

Women's Rights are legally recognized entitlements and freedoms due to women under international human rights and humanitarian law. These include freedom from discrimination, protection from gender-based violence, and equal participation in all spheres of life. Women's rights are often violated during conflicts, necessitating robust protective mechanisms.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.3 Armed Conflict

Armed Conflict is a situation of protracted armed violence between organized groups, typically involving state and non-state actors, which triggers legal obligations for the protection of civilians and combatants alike. The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon qualifies as a non-international armed conflict, with profound implications for women's safety and rights.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.4 Appraisal

Appraisal refers to the systematic evaluation of policies, laws, and interventions to determine their effectiveness, relevance, and compliance with legal standards. Appraising measures to protect women in conflict assesses both successes and gaps in legal frameworks, institutional responses, and practical implementation.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.5 Anglophone Cameroon

Anglophone Cameroon refers to the North-West and South-West English-speaking regions of Cameroon, where historical, socio-political, and linguistic tensions have escalated into a protracted armed conflict since 2017. The

<sup>1</sup> Nkwi, P. N., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2018). *The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon: Socio-political and human rights dimensions*. Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Fonchingong, C. C. (2019). Women, conflict, and peacebuilding in Cameroon: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 13(2), 45–59.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. United Nations.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Protected persons: Women. ICRC.

<sup>5</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). How is the term “armed conflict” defined in international humanitarian law? ICRC.

<sup>6</sup> Fonchingong, C. C. (2019). Women, conflict, and peacebuilding in Cameroon: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 13(2), 45–59.

region provides a critical case study for examining the vulnerabilities of women in conflict and the effectiveness of protective interventions.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal and socio-legal research methodology to examine the safeguarding of women's rights in armed conflicts, with particular focus on the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to analyze legal norms, institutional practices, and contextual realities rather than to generate statistical data.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrinal research method is employed to systematically analyze relevant international, regional, and domestic legal instruments governing the protection of women in armed conflict. Doctrinal legal research focuses on the interpretation and application of legal rules as contained in statutes, treaties, judicial decisions, and authoritative legal texts.<sup>3</sup> Instruments examined include international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and women-specific legal frameworks such as the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Judicial decisions and interpretative guidance from international bodies are also analyzed to assess the scope and effectiveness of existing legal protections.

In addition, the study adopts a socio-legal approach, which situates legal norms within their broader social, political, and institutional contexts. Socio-legal research allows for a critical examination of how law operates in practice and how social realities influence the implementation of legal standards.<sup>4</sup> This approach is particularly relevant in conflict settings, where gaps often exist between formal legal protections and lived experiences.

The research further utilizes a case study design, focusing on the Anglophone regions of Cameroon as a specific instance of a non-international armed conflict. Case study research enables an in-depth and context-sensitive analysis of complex legal and social phenomena within a defined geographical and political setting.<sup>5</sup> The Anglophone crisis provides a suitable case for evaluating the effectiveness of mechanisms aimed at safeguarding women's rights in protracted armed conflicts.

Data for the study is drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, textbooks, policy reports, publications of international organizations, and official United Nations documents. Secondary data analysis is appropriate where primary data collection is impractical or poses ethical and security risks, as is often the case in conflict zones.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the study employs analytical and evaluative techniques to appraise the adequacy and effectiveness of existing legal and institutional frameworks. This involves identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the protection of women's rights, with the aim of proposing informed and contextually relevant recommendations for improving safeguarding mechanisms in armed conflict situations, particularly in Anglophone Cameroon.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Framework, as articulated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and its subsequent resolutions. The WPS framework provides a normative and analytical lens for understanding the gendered impacts of armed conflict and the obligations of states and non-state actors to safeguard women's rights before, during, and after conflict.<sup>7</sup>

The WPS framework is premised on four interrelated pillars: prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. The protection pillar is particularly relevant to this study, as it emphasizes the responsibility of parties to armed conflict to protect women from sexual violence, exploitation, abuse, and other serious human rights violations. This pillar aligns directly with the study's focus on safeguarding women's rights in the context of the

<sup>1</sup> Nkwi, P. N., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2018). *The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon: Socio-political and human rights dimensions*. Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

<sup>3</sup> McConville, M., & Chui, W. H. (2017). *Research methods for law* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Banakar, R., & Travers, M. (2013). *Law and social theory* (2nd ed.). Hart Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston, M. P. (2017). Secondary data analysis: A method of which the time has come. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, 3(3), 619–626.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. United Nations.

Anglophone armed conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The framework also highlights the importance of participation, recognizing women not merely as victims of armed conflict but as critical actors in peace-building and conflict resolution processes. This theoretical perspective enables the study to examine the extent to which women in Anglophone Cameroon are included or excluded from peace negotiations, decision-making structures, and post-conflict governance, and how such exclusion undermines the protection of their rights.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the WPS framework integrates principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, thereby bridging normative legal standards and practical realities in conflict situations. It provides a basis for assessing state responsibility, compliance with international obligations, and institutional responses to gender-based violations during armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> Through this lens, the study critically appraises the effectiveness of legal and policy measures adopted in Cameroon to protect women in the Anglophone regions.

By adopting the Women, Peace and Security framework, this study situates the Anglophone conflict within a broader global discourse on gender, security, and human rights. The framework offers a coherent theoretical foundation for analyzing women's vulnerabilities, state obligations, and structural challenges to safeguarding women's rights in non-international armed conflicts, thereby strengthening the analytical and normative grounding of the study.

## 5. Legal Framework

The protection of women's rights in armed conflict is governed by a complex and interrelated body of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international criminal law, and regional legal instruments. These frameworks impose binding obligations on states to prevent gender-based violence, protect women as civilians, and ensure accountability for violations committed during hostilities. In the context of the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon, which qualifies as a non-international armed conflict, the applicability and ratification status of relevant legal instruments are critical to assessing the extent of state responsibility and compliance. This section examines the key legal frameworks governing the safeguarding of women's rights in armed conflict and evaluates Cameroon's formal commitment to each instrument through ratification or binding membership.

### 5.1 Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Common Article 3

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 form the foundation of international humanitarian law and provide minimum protections for civilians, including women, during armed conflict. Common Article 3, applicable to non-international armed conflicts, prohibits violence to life and person, cruel treatment, torture, and outrages upon personal dignity. These protections are particularly significant for women affected by the Anglophone conflict, who face heightened risks of abuse and violence. Cameroon ratified the four Geneva Conventions in 1963, thereby assuming binding obligations to respect and ensure respect for their provisions in all armed conflicts occurring within its territory.<sup>4</sup>

### 5.2 Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions (1977)

Additional Protocol II supplements Common Article 3 by providing more detailed protections for civilians in non-international armed conflicts. It expressly prohibits rape, enforced prostitution, and any form of indecent assault and requires special protection for women against sexual violence. These provisions are directly relevant to safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone regions. Cameroon ratified Additional Protocol II in 1984, making its provisions legally binding and applicable to the ongoing armed conflict (ICRC, 2025).

### 5.3 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

CEDAW is the primary international human rights treaty dedicated to eliminating discrimination against women. It obliges states to take appropriate legislative, administrative, and judicial measures to protect women from gender-based violence, including in situations of armed conflict. Cameroon ratified CEDAW in 1994, thereby committing itself to the protection of women's rights and the elimination of discriminatory practices affecting women in conflict-affected areas.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Protected persons: Women. ICRC.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women. (2015). Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

<sup>3</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). How is the term "armed conflict" defined in international humanitarian law? ICRC.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Treaties, states parties and commentaries. ICRC.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

#### *5.4 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*

The ICCPR and ICESCR guarantee fundamental rights such as the right to life, human dignity, freedom from torture, health, and an adequate standard of living. These rights remain applicable during armed conflict alongside international humanitarian law.

Cameroon ratified both the ICCPR and the ICESCR in 1984, making their provisions binding and relevant to the protection of women's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in the Anglophone conflict (United Nations General Assembly, 1966a; 1966b).

#### *5.5 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)*

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 established the Women, Peace and Security agenda, emphasizing the protection of women in armed conflict, the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, and the participation of women in peace processes.

Although Security Council resolutions are not subject to ratification, they are binding on all UN Member States, including Cameroon, by virtue of the UN Charter. Cameroon is therefore obligated to implement Resolution 1325 through domestic policies and conflict-response mechanisms (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2000).

#### *5.6 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)*

The Rome Statute provides a framework for individual criminal responsibility for serious violations of international law, including rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and other forms of sexual violence committed during armed conflict. These acts are recognized as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Cameroon ratified the Rome Statute in 2003, thereby accepting the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court where domestic accountability mechanisms are ineffective or unavailable (International Criminal Court, 1998).

#### *5.7 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*

The African Charter guarantees equality before the law, respect for human dignity, and freedom from discrimination. These rights form a regional legal basis for the protection of women in armed conflict situations.

Cameroon ratified the African Charter in 1989, making its provisions binding and enforceable within the African human rights system (Organization of African Unity [OAU], 1981).

#### *5.8 Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)*

The Maputo Protocol specifically addresses violence against women and imposes obligations on states to protect women in armed conflict, including through the prohibition of sexual violence and the provision of effective remedies.

Cameroon ratified the Maputo Protocol in 2012, thereby strengthening its regional legal commitments toward safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone regions (African Union, 2003).

### **6. An Overview of the Cameroon Anglophone Armed Conflict**

The Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon is rooted in historical, political, and legal grievances arising from the country's colonial legacy and post-independence governance structure. Cameroon's bilingual character, inherited from British and French colonial administrations, has been marked by persistent tensions over political representation, legal systems, and cultural identity. Following the 1961 plebiscite and reunification, Anglophone Cameroonians increasingly expressed concerns over marginalization, erosion of the common law system, and centralized governance, which gradually crystallized into what is commonly referred to as the "Anglophone Problem."<sup>1</sup>

The conflict escalated significantly in 2016 after peaceful protests by Anglophone lawyers and teachers against the perceived imposition of Francophone legal and educational practices. The state's response characterized by arrests, repression of dissent, and restrictions on communication contributed to the radicalization of grievances and the emergence of armed separatist groups advocating for the creation of an independent state known as "Ambazonia."<sup>2</sup> By 2017, confrontations between separatist fighters and Cameroonian security forces had intensified, transforming the crisis into a protracted non-international armed conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Konings, P., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2003). *Negotiating an Anglophone identity: A study of the politics of recognition and representation in Cameroon*. Brill.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group. (2017). Cameroon's Anglophone crisis.

The armed conflict has been marked by widespread violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law by both state and non-state actors. These violations include extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, village burnings, kidnappings, and attacks on civilians. Scholarly analysis by Kwebe Augustine Nkwiyr highlights that the Anglophone conflict is characterized by weak enforcement of existing legal protections and significant accountability gaps, despite Cameroon's ratification of major international legal instruments applicable to armed conflict.<sup>1</sup> His work underscores the broader systemic challenges in translating international legal commitments into effective protection on the ground.

Women have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, experiencing displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, economic deprivation, and restricted access to justice. The breakdown of law and order has heightened women's vulnerability to rape, sexual exploitation, forced marriages, and domestic abuse. At the same time, women remain largely excluded from peace negotiations and decision-making processes, reinforcing their marginalization and undermining sustainable conflict resolution efforts.<sup>2</sup> Nkwiyr's analysis further demonstrates that the failure to protect specific civilian groups in the Anglophone conflict reflects a broader pattern of non-compliance with international humanitarian norms, a pattern that similarly undermines the safeguarding of women's rights.<sup>3</sup>

Despite ongoing calls for dialogue and reform, the conflict persists, with limited accountability for violations and inadequate protection for civilians. The continued militarization of the Anglophone regions, coupled with political stalemate, has entrenched cycles of violence and insecurity. As scholars have observed, addressing the Anglophone crisis requires not only political solutions but also effective implementation of legal frameworks designed to protect vulnerable groups, particularly women, during armed conflict.<sup>4</sup>

## 7. Effectiveness in Safeguarding the Rights of Women in the Anglophone Cameroon Armed Conflict

The effectiveness of safeguarding the rights of women in the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon remains largely limited, despite the existence of an extensive legal and normative framework at international, regional, and domestic levels. Cameroon has ratified major international humanitarian and human rights instruments that provide robust protections for women in armed conflict. However, the persistence of widespread violations indicates a significant gap between formal legal commitments and practical implementation. This implementation deficit undermines the protective intent of the law and exposes women to continued vulnerability within the conflict environment.

From an international humanitarian law perspective, the protections afforded to women under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II have not been effectively enforced. Reports of sexual violence, forced displacement, and attacks on civilians in the Anglophone regions demonstrate weak compliance by both state forces and non-state armed groups. The lack of effective monitoring mechanisms and limited accountability for violations have contributed to a culture of impunity, reducing the deterrent effect of these legal norms.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the effectiveness of international human rights law in safeguarding women's rights during the conflict has been constrained. Although instruments such as CEDAW and the ICCPR impose clear obligations on Cameroon to protect women from gender-based violence and discrimination, enforcement at the domestic level has been inadequate. Structural barriers, including fear of reprisals, limited access to courts, and militarization of affected regions, have prevented many women from seeking justice. As a result, legal protections remain largely theoretical for women living in conflict-affected communities.<sup>6</sup>

The Women, Peace and Security agenda, particularly United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, has also suffered from weak domestic operationalization. While Resolution 1325 emphasizes women's protection and participation in peace processes, women in Anglophone Cameroon remain underrepresented in dialogue initiatives and decision-making structures related to conflict resolution. The absence of a fully implemented national action plan tailored to the Anglophone context has limited the transformative potential of the WPS

<sup>1</sup> Nkwiyr, K. A. (2025). Armed conflicts and the media: An assessment of the protection of war correspondents (journalists) in the underway Anglophone Cameroon armed conflicts. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 1025–1052.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2019). Cameroon: Violence against civilians in the Anglophone regions.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G., & Willis, J. (2021). *The moral economy of elections in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Protected persons: Women. ICRC.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

framework in addressing women's specific needs during the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly analysis further reveals that institutional weaknesses significantly affect the effectiveness of women's rights protection. Nkwiyyir<sup>2</sup> observes that although Cameroon has accepted international legal obligations, enforcement mechanisms remain fragile, particularly in conflict zones where military priorities often override human rights considerations.<sup>3</sup> This systemic weakness has contributed to the failure to protect vulnerable civilian groups, including women, and has diminished trust in state institutions responsible for safeguarding rights.

At the regional level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Maputo Protocol provide strong normative protection for women in armed conflict. However, the African human rights system relies heavily on state cooperation for enforcement. Cameroon's limited implementation of regional recommendations and the absence of effective domestic follow-up mechanisms have constrained the practical impact of these instruments on the lived experiences of women in the Anglophone regions.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, while the legal framework for safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone armed conflict is comprehensive, its effectiveness has been undermined by poor implementation, weak accountability, limited access to justice, and the exclusion of women from peace-building processes. Strengthening effectiveness requires not only legal reform but also political will, institutional capacity-building, gender-sensitive conflict responses, and meaningful inclusion of women in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

## 8. Challenges in Safeguarding the Rights of Women in the Anglophone Cameroon Armed Conflict

Weak implementation of legal frameworks Despite Cameroon's ratification of major international, regional, and domestic legal instruments protecting women in armed conflict, implementation remains poor. International humanitarian law and international human rights law obligations are often subordinated to security considerations, leading to ineffective enforcement and limited protection for women in conflict-affected areas. This gap between legal commitment and practice significantly undermines the safeguarding of women's rights.<sup>5</sup>

### 8.1 Culture of Impunity for Violations

A pervasive culture of impunity represents a major obstacle to protecting women's rights in the Anglophone conflict. Sexual and gender-based violence, including rape and exploitation, are rarely investigated or prosecuted. Fear of reprisals, lack of witness protection, and distrust in justice institutions discourage reporting, thereby perpetuating abuse and denying victims access to justice.<sup>6</sup>

### 8.2 Militarization and Insecurity of Affected Regions

The extensive militarization of the Anglophone regions has intensified women's vulnerability to violence and displacement. Frequent military operations and armed confrontations disrupt social and economic life, weaken community protection mechanisms, and expose women to exploitation and abuse. The collapse of social safety nets has disproportionately affected women, particularly widows and female-headed households.<sup>7</sup>

### 8.3 Exclusion of Women from Peace-Building and Decision-Making Processes

Women remain largely excluded from formal peace negotiations and conflict-resolution initiatives, despite the emphasis on participation under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. This exclusion limits the integration of women's experiences and perspectives into peace processes and weakens the sustainability of conflict-resolution outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

### 8.4 Institutional and Structural Weaknesses

<sup>1</sup> UN Women. (2015). Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

<sup>2</sup> Nkwiyyir, K. A. (2025). Armed conflicts and the media: An assessment of the protection of war correspondents (journalists) in the underway Anglophone Cameroon armed conflicts. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 1025–1052.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> African Union. (2003). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security.

Limited institutional capacity, inadequate gender-sensitive training for security personnel, and insufficient resources for victim support services have constrained effective protection of women's rights. Nkwiyir<sup>1</sup> notes that fragile institutions in conflict zones hinder the enforcement of international legal obligations, leaving vulnerable groups such as women without adequate protection.

### 8.5 Socio-Cultural Norms and Stigma

Deep-rooted socio-cultural attitudes continue to silence survivors of sexual violence and discourage reporting. Stigmatization and victim-blaming practices further marginalize women and restrict access to legal and psychosocial support. These cultural barriers interact with legal and institutional failures, compounding the challenges faced by women in the Anglophone conflict.<sup>2</sup>

## 9. Practical Cases of the Failure in Safeguarding the Rights of Women in the Anglophone Cameroon Armed Conflict

A plethora of cases have been recorded about the violation and failure in safeguarding women in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict. These cases shall be examined seriatim.

### 9.1 Conflict-Related Sexual Violence During Village Raids and Security Operations

One of the clearest practical failures in safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone conflict is the occurrence of sexual violence during military raids and counter-insurgency operations. Human rights investigations have documented instances where women were raped or sexually assaulted during house-to-house searches in villages in the North-West and South-West regions, particularly following clashes between security forces and separatist fighters. In many cases, victims were unable to identify perpetrators due to fear, trauma, or the presence of armed personnel, and no effective investigations followed. This reflects a breakdown in command responsibility, military discipline, and victim-protection mechanisms, despite Cameroon's obligations under international humanitarian law.<sup>3</sup>

### 9.2 Sexual Exploitation of Displaced Women and Girls

The mass displacement caused by the conflict has exposed women and girls to sexual exploitation, particularly in urban centers such as Buea, Bamenda, Douala, and Yaoundé, where internally displaced women seek safety and livelihood opportunities. Practical failures are evident in the absence of structured protection systems for displaced women, leading some to engage in survival sex to secure shelter, food, or financial assistance. The lack of targeted government protection programs and oversight demonstrates a failure to protect displaced women from secondary victimization arising directly from the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Failure of police and judicial authorities to respond to rape complaints. In practice, women who attempt to report sexual violence in conflict-affected areas often encounter intimidation, refusal to record complaints, or pressure to "settle matters privately." Police stations in militarized zones are frequently inaccessible, and judicial officers are either absent or unwilling to pursue cases linked to the conflict. This institutional failure has resulted in extremely low prosecution rates for conflict-related sexual violence, reinforcing a culture of impunity and denying women effective access to justice.<sup>5</sup>

### 9.3 Burning of Villages and Destruction of Women's Livelihoods

Military operations and armed clashes have led to the burning of villages and destruction of farmlands, markets, and homes-economic spaces where women traditionally play dominant roles.<sup>6</sup> Women traders and farmers have lost their means of survival, pushing many into extreme poverty and dependency. The absence of compensation, livelihood restoration programs, or social protection schemes for affected women illustrates a practical failure to safeguard women's economic and social rights during the armed conflict.<sup>7</sup>

### 9.4 Abductions and Forced Relationships by Non-State Armed Groups

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> African Union. (2003). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2019). Cameroon: Violence against civilians in the Anglophone regions.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). Cameroon situation: Protection and displacement overview.

<sup>5</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Protected persons: Women. ICRC.

<sup>6</sup> UN Women. (2015). Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

<sup>7</sup> Nkwi, P. N. (2020). *The Anglophone problem in Cameroon*. Langaa Research & Publishing.

Separatist armed groups have also been implicated in the abduction of women and girls for forced domestic labor, coerced relationships, or sexual exploitation in bush camps. Families often remain silent due to fear of retaliation, while state protection mechanisms are largely absent in areas under separatist influence. The inability of the state to secure these territories or provide alternative protection reflects a failure to safeguard women from abuses committed by non-state actors, despite clear obligations under international law.<sup>1</sup>

#### *9.5 Marginalization of Women in Dialogue and Peace Initiatives*

At the practical level, women's organizations and female community leaders are rarely invited to formal peace dialogues, mediation processes, or security consultations related to the Anglophone crisis. Peace initiatives have largely been elite-driven and male-dominated, ignoring women's lived experiences of violence, displacement, and survival. This exclusion represents a direct failure to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and undermines the development of gender-responsive and sustainable peace solutions.<sup>2</sup>

#### *9.6 Weak Institutional Coordination and Delayed Humanitarian Response*

Nkwiyr (2025)<sup>3</sup> highlights that weak coordination among security agencies, humanitarian actors, and justice institutions has significantly affected civilian protection in the Anglophone conflict. In practice, delays in humanitarian access, lack of referral systems for survivors of sexual violence, and absence of psychosocial support services have left women without timely assistance. This institutional fragmentation demonstrates a systemic failure to translate legal obligations into effective protection on the ground.

### **10. Findings**

This study finds that, despite Cameroon's ratification of key international, regional, and domestic legal instruments designed to safeguard the rights of women in armed conflict, protection in practice remains largely ineffective in the Anglophone regions. A significant gap exists between formal legal commitments and their implementation on the ground. International humanitarian law and international human rights law norms applicable to non-international armed conflicts have not been consistently enforced, exposing women to continued violence, displacement, and rights violations.

The findings reveal that women in the Anglophone armed conflict are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, sexual exploitation, forced relationships, and domestic abuse exacerbated by insecurity and displacement. Both state security forces and non-state armed groups have been implicated in violations, while accountability mechanisms remain weak. The failure to effectively investigate and prosecute perpetrators has fostered a culture of impunity, discouraging reporting and denying women access to justice.

The study further finds that displacement resulting from the conflict has significantly increased women's vulnerability. Internally displaced women face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, economic deprivation, and lack of access to healthcare, education, and psychosocial support. The absence of targeted protection mechanisms and sustainable livelihood programs underscores a failure to safeguard women's socio-economic rights during the conflict.

Another key finding is the limited operationalization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Cameroon. Despite the binding nature of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, women remain largely excluded from peace negotiations, dialogue initiatives, and security decision-making processes related to the Anglophone crisis. This exclusion undermines gender-responsive peace-building and weakens the prospects for sustainable conflict resolution.

The study also finds that institutional weaknesses significantly undermine the effectiveness of women's rights protection. Fragile coordination among security agencies, judicial institutions, and humanitarian actors has resulted in delayed responses to violations, inadequate survivor support, and ineffective monitoring of abuses. As highlighted by Nkwiyr (2025),<sup>4</sup> these systemic deficiencies reflect broader challenges in enforcing international legal obligations within conflict zones.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while the legal framework for safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone armed conflict is comprehensive, its effectiveness is severely constrained by poor implementation, weak accountability, institutional fragility, and the marginalization of women from peace and security processes.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security.

<sup>3</sup> Nkwiyr, K. A. (2025). Armed conflicts and the media: An assessment of the protection of war correspondents (journalists) in the underway Anglophone Cameroon armed conflicts. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 1025–1052.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

## 11. Conclusion

This study has examined the effectiveness of safeguarding the rights of women in the context of the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict, with particular attention to the applicable legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and lived realities on the ground. The analysis demonstrates that although Cameroon has ratified and domesticated key international and regional instruments aimed at protecting women during armed conflicts, these normative commitments have not translated into effective protection for women in the conflict-affected North-West and South-West regions.

The study concludes that women have continued to suffer severe and disproportionate violations, including sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement, economic marginalization, and exclusion from peace and security processes. Both state and non-state actors have contributed to these violations, while accountability mechanisms remain largely ineffective. The persistent failure to investigate abuses, prosecute perpetrators, and provide adequate remedies for victims has entrenched a climate of impunity that undermines the rule of law and weakens confidence in state institutions.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a context-specific legal and empirical analysis of women's rights protection within a protracted non-international armed conflict in Cameroon, an area that remains underexplored in African conflict literature. By systematically linking international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda to documented practices in the Anglophone regions, the study advances understanding of the gap between legal obligations and implementation in fragile conflict settings. It further enriches the literature by foregrounding women's lived experiences and institutional failures, thereby offering a framework for evaluating gendered protection in similar internal armed conflicts across Africa.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of safeguarding women's rights in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict remains largely inadequate. The persistent disconnect between law and practice underscores the need for stronger political will, institutional reform, and genuine commitment to accountability and gender inclusion. Without translating legal obligations into concrete action, the protection of women in armed conflict will remain aspirational rather than real. Sustainable peace in Cameroon is unlikely to be achieved unless women's rights, agency, and protection are placed at the center of conflict response and peace-building strategies.

## 12. Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, it is evident that the persistent violations of women's rights in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict stem largely from weak implementation of legal frameworks, limited accountability, institutional fragility, and the marginalization of women in peace and security processes. The following recommendations are therefore proposed as practical and policy-oriented measures aimed at strengthening the protection of women during the ongoing conflict and in post-conflict recovery efforts. These recommendations are designed to bridge the gap between law and practice and to promote a gender-responsive approach to conflict management and peace-building in Cameroon.

### *12.1 Strengthen Enforcement of Legal and Policy Frameworks Protecting Women in Armed Conflict*

The Government of Cameroon should move beyond formal ratification of international and regional instruments by ensuring their practical enforcement. This requires the integration of gender-protection norms into military doctrines, rules of engagement, and operational manuals for security forces deployed in the Anglophone regions. Regular training and monitoring mechanisms should be instituted to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights standards, particularly those relating to the protection of women.

### *12.2 Enhance Accountability for Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*

Effective safeguarding of women's rights depends on credible accountability mechanisms. Independent investigations into allegations of sexual and gender-based violence committed by both state and non-state actors should be prioritized. Strengthening prosecutorial capacity, establishing specialized courts or mobile judicial units in conflict-affected areas, and ensuring witness protection would reduce impunity and restore confidence in the justice system.

### *12.3 Establish Targeted Protection and Support Systems for Displaced Women and Girls*

Displacement has emerged as a major driver of women's vulnerability in the Anglophone conflict. Dedicated protection programs should be developed to address the specific needs of internally displaced women, including access to healthcare, psychosocial support, education, and livelihood opportunities. Such measures would reduce exposure to sexual exploitation and enhance women's resilience in displacement settings.

### *12.4 Operationalize the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*

The meaningful participation of women in peace and security processes remains limited. Cameroon should fully

implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 by ensuring women's inclusion in peace negotiations, mediation efforts, and community dialogue initiatives. Women's perspectives are essential for designing gender-responsive conflict resolution strategies and achieving sustainable peace outcomes.

#### *12.5 Improve Humanitarian Coordination and Survivor-Centered Responses*

Fragmented institutional responses have undermined protection efforts. Strengthening coordination among government institutions, humanitarian actors, and local women's organizations would ensure timely assistance to survivors of violence. Establishing clear referral pathways for medical, legal, and psychosocial services would significantly improve the effectiveness of protection mechanisms for women in conflict zones.

#### *12.6 Address the Structural Causes of the Anglophone Conflict through Inclusive Dialogue*

Long-term protection of women's rights cannot be achieved without resolving the underlying drivers of the conflict. Inclusive political dialogue, decentralization reforms, and reconciliation initiatives should be pursued alongside gender-sensitive recovery programs. Addressing structural grievances would reduce violence, enhance civilian protection, and create an enabling environment for the realization of women's rights.

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