

**From Maltreatment to Radicalization: A Qualitative Analysis of the Case of Anglophone
Cameroonian Widows**

DISSERTATION

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By

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The views expressed in this article reflect those of the author and not of the Global Fund for Widows.

List of Abbreviations

ACLED – Armed Conflict Location and Event Data

ADF – Ambazonia Defence Forces

AGC – Ambazonia Governing Council

AIDS – Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

ASC – Ambazonia Self-Defence Council

CAR – Central African Republic

CEDAW – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

CHRDA – Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa

CT – Counterterrorism

CTWOO – Come Together Widows and Orphans Organization

DCAF – Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance

DDR – Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

FGM – Female Genital Mutilation

GFW – Global Fund for Widows

GGWHA – Grace Gardens Women Health Association

HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HIV/AIDS – Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

HRP – Humanitarian Response Plan

HTP – Harmful Traditional Practices

ICG – International Crisis Group

IDDRS – Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

IG – Interim Government of Ambazonia

IHL – International Humanitarian Law

IHRL – International Human Rights Law

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NAP – National Action Plan

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council

NSAG – Non-State Armed Group

NWR – North West Region

OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

PVE – Preventing Violent Extremism

RUF – Revolutionary United Front

S/GBV – Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

STI – Sexually Transmitted Disease

SWR – South West Region

UN – United Nations

UNGA – United Nations General Assembly

UNHCR – United Nations Human Rights Council

UNSCR – United Nations Security Council

VE – Violent Extremism

WoG – Widows of Grace Cameroon

WPS – Women, Peace and Security

WRP – Widowhood Rites and Practices

Abstract

There are over 258 million widows in the world today and 500 million of their children, representing up to 80% of conflict-zone populations. This number is only increasing, as global conflict zones have expanded by 65% since 2021. Faced with stigmatization and socio-economic discrimination, widows are left particularly vulnerable to poverty and gender-based violence. Whether effectively widowed through the death of a spouse or the disappearance of a partner, these women are often left without any physical or social protections. With little institutional support and few pathways to security, they and their dependents become far more vulnerable not only to various forms of harm but also radicalization—demonstrated in the fact that one in three violent extremist recruits come from widowed households. Drawing from social anthropological literature on widowhood, international reporting on the ongoing Cameroonian Anglophone Crisis, and interviews with academics, professionals and widows in Cameroon and the surrounding region, this thesis explores the ways in which Cameroonian widows and their dependents are vulnerable to harm and ultimately radicalization if left unaided.

Key Words: *widow, widowhood, single female head of household, widower, orphan, radicalization, Anglophone Crisis, Cameroon, North West Cameroon, South West Cameroon, armed group, gender based violence, harmful traditional practices*

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“There is a third wartime narrative. It features women. It is billed as ‘human interest,’ a story or a photograph intended to make complex violent conflict – in Syria, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine – understandable to distracted viewers. The women featured are usually crying. They are crying over the dead body of a husband or son. Or they are standing stunned in front of rubble that was their home. *Rarely are they portrayed as having full lives.* Even more rarely are they interviewed and asked for their ideas about the war. Displaced women grieve over fallen men and lost homes. That is presumed to be the chief role for women in war. Their wartime feminine tears convey the editors’ message. *Too often, we, the viewers, absorb that simplistic message.* [emphasis added]”¹

- Cynthia Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*

Introduction

Conflict is a widow-maker. There are an estimated 350 million widows in the world today, and over 540 million of their children—meaning that widows already make up 13 percent of the world’s population.² In active conflict zones this number is far higher, where widows can represent up to 80% of wartime populations.³ This ratio is only set to grow, as the international frequency of armed conflict continues to rise. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)’s most recent Conflict Index Report, global conflict has doubled over the last five years.⁴ The year 2024 saw a 25 percent increase in all events of political violence since 2023, and an increase in *all* forms of conflict events.⁵ In spite of this, very little work has been done to further disaggregate the human rights implications of such conflicts, particularly in the case of demographics informed by gender. Enloe attributes this blotting out of the ever-present gender dynamics of war to the popular sentiment that “...war is so bloody that gender doesn’t matter. Or wartime strategic calculations are portrayed as so bloodless that gender politics are irrelevant.”⁶ In other words, the violence of war is so indiscriminate that the differentiated and gendered contexts of people’s lives leading into war—and the lasting effects of conflict on their postwar lives—are irrelevant. It would take too much time to turn international attention to the full extent of war’s gendered effects—time which peacebuilding and humanitarian restoration efforts do not have amidst the urgency of conflict. But this is a falsity. War does not begin and end with the first and last exchange of fire. Without addressing the diverse and unequal lived experiences of conflict informed by so many intersecting identities, it is impossible for surviving communities to truly move on from such events, or to limit the extent of similar future incidences.

¹ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* (University of California press, 2023), 7.

² Riada Asimovic Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources,” *New Lines Magazine*, April 21, 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/as-war-widow-population-grows-so-does-need-for-resources/>.

³ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

⁴ *ACLED Conflict Index: Global Conflicts Double over the Past Five Years* (n.d.), accessed June 13, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/>.

⁵ *ACLED Conflict Index*.

⁶ Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, 7.

The United Nations (UN) estimates that in Sub-Saharan Africa, 44 percent of women are widows, in comparison to only 7 percent of men.⁷ These numbers do not discount the lived experience of widowers and the very real grief and challenges which they face, but they do demonstrate the sheer size of this invisible humanitarian crisis. In many cultures, discriminatory traditional practices surrounding widowhood are so normalized that they become invisible to the public eye. But once one knows where to look, the dehumanization of widows is visible everywhere, regardless of religion, era or culture.

So long as the institution of marriage has existed, so too has the event of widowhood. Present in virtually every society, widows remain largely absent from public view due to societal shame and widespread ignorance. Historical and textual analyses reflect enduring patterns of the marginalization of war widows, and ongoing conversations around ascribed widowhood practices across cultures. The Christian Middle Ages celebrated a “model of pious widowhood” centered around chastity and good work, idealizing the performative widow.⁸ In the Bible, 1 Timothy 5:5 describes the true widow (or the “widow indeed”) as one who forever demonstrates her grief. Whereas the “merry widow” does not behave according to ascribed mourning behaviors.⁹ Interestingly, widows in Cameroon—to be the country focus of this thesis—today still risk being labeled a “happy widow” if they challenge the patriarchal order of harmful rites and practices, and face the accusation of intentionally having killed their husband to claim his property.¹⁰

Historical records also reveal a Muslim tradition of “martyr widows,” in which widowed women are portrayed as one-dimensional victims defined by the loss of their husband and without any individual personality or needs.¹¹ This social death following the loss of a woman’s husband can be found across numerous different societies, and while such treatment is demonstrably more common to female widows, popular stories throughout history suggest similar—if less routine—treatment of male widowers. In the story of Sinbad the Sailor and his seven voyages told in the *One Thousand and One Nights* (The Arabian Nights), Sinbad himself encounters cultural condemnation following the death of his wife.

While residing with a host community during his fourth voyage, Sinbad hears of the passing of the wife of one of his friends and neighbors. Upon going to console the man, he discovers the “barbarous” local custom of a man or woman being buried alive upon the death of their spouse,

⁷ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta and Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2016): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1234671>.

⁸ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

⁹ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

¹⁰ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview with Dr. Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025, phone call.

¹¹ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

causing his friend to grieve his own life in addition to that of his deceased wife.¹² As the man explains to Sinbad:

“This is a law which our ancestors established in this island, and it is always observed inviolably. The living husband is interred with the dead wife, and the living wife with the dead husband. Nothing can save me; every one must submit to this law.”¹³

Sinbad attends the funeral of the man’s wife later that day, where he watches his friend enter a coffin and descend into the funerary pit alongside his wife. Having never encountered such a custom in all his travels, Sinbad is shocked by the practice, which to his peers is simply a fate one must accept upon their marriage. In desperation, he goes to the king to ask if this prescription applies to foreigners as well, to which the king beatifically replies that all those who are married on the island are subject to the practice.¹⁴ Sinbad—hoping to soon return home to his native Baghdad—becomes terrified that his wife will die before he can make his escape and that his life will be condemned alongside hers. She soon after does fall ill and die, and he finds himself subject to the same ritual as his late friend.¹⁵ Begging his peers to save him so he can return to the wife and children he left behind in his native country, he is met with mockery for his fear of death and lowered into the pit alongside his wife.¹⁶

As the hero of his story, Sinbad survives and manages to make his escape, but for many women throughout history this tragic fate was not a fiction with which to entertain an audience, but a reality without escape. The historical Hindu practice of Sati, or widow burning, is one of the most well-known of such traditions. A custom by which widows are expected to throw themselves upon the funerary pyre of their late husband, Sati prescribed martyrdom as the appropriate response of the ideal woman to widowhood.¹⁷ First banned by British colonial authorities in 1829, the practice continued unregulated beyond India’s independence in 1947. The last known case of Sati was recorded in Deorala village on 4 September 1987, when 18 year-old Roop Kanwar climbed onto the pyre of Maal Singh—her husband of only seven months—and burned to death with his head in her lap.¹⁸

¹² “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad,” in *The Arabian Nights Entertainments, Carefully Revised, and Occasionally Corrected from the Arabic. To Which Is Added, a Selection of New Tales, Now First Translated from the Arabic Originals.*, trans. John Scott, I (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811), 48, <https://knarf.english.upenn.edu/EtAlia/sinbad.html>.

¹³ “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad,” 49.

¹⁴ “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad,” 50.

¹⁵ “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad,” 51–52.

¹⁶ “The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad,” 52.

¹⁷ “Widow Burning: The Burning Issue of Colonial Britain and India,” Utrecht University, *Cultures, Citizenship and Human Rights*, 2025, <https://cchr.uu.nl/widow-burning-the-burning-issue-of-colonial-britain-and-india/>.

¹⁸ Geeta Pandey, “Why Fight for Justice Isn’t over in India’s ‘horrific’ Widow-Burning Case, 37 Years On,” *BBC*, October 19, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn8ykmm2p1go>.

Sinbad's and Roop's stories—fictional and real alike—suggest longstanding cultural inclinations to separate widows from daily life in one way or another, which become so ordinary to those involved that their harm becomes invisible. In spite of what critics of more gendered analyses of war might say, such discrimination does not cease with the onset of conflict, making survival all the more difficult for widowed families that are already severely disadvantaged. The resulting desperation and indignity suffered in conflict—augmented by that caused by widowhood—can drive widows and their children to extremes that they might not otherwise resort to. Through the case study of Anglophone Cameroon, this thesis therefore explores the question: *In what ways are widows and their dependents particularly vulnerable to maltreatment, human rights abuses, and ultimately radicalization in conflict and post-conflict zones of the Cameroonian Anglophone Crisis?*

In doing so, this thesis is structured into six chapters. **Chapter 1** provides a *theoretical framework* grounded in postcolonial feminist and political economy theory. **Chapter 2** presents the *methodologies* used in analyzing possible links between widowhood and radicalization in the context of the Anglophone conflict, outlining the process of desk research, literature review, and key informant interviews, while **Chapter 3** discloses the *limitations* of this thesis, listing the limited resources and timeframe of this research as significant constraints on this project. **Chapter 4** provides a survey of the existing (very limited) discourse on widowhood in international relations. Closing with brief remarks on the particular case of war widows and on how the unique challenges of widowhood can make both widows and their children particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, this chapter opens the door for further discussion of these risks in the particular case of radicalization later in Chapter 6. **Chapter 5** surveys the general experience of widowhood across Cameroon, with a particular focus on the western part of Cameroon in which the Anglophone Crisis is taking place, describing the sexual and gender-based violence (S/GBV), economic discrimination, and psychosocial isolation experienced by widows and their children to varying degrees. **Chapter 6** subsequently applies these challenges to the Anglophone Crisis, providing an overview of the conflict and the interplay between widowhood discrimination and the effects of armed conflict on civilian livelihoods, before exploring the ways in which such exacerbated vulnerabilities can facilitate radicalization either through kidnapping or by choice. Finally, **Conclusions and Recommendations** reconcile these six sections, reiterating the possibility of continued discrimination against widows facilitating widespread radicalization, and outlining some of the most essential changes to the international system in order to prevent this.

1. Theoretical Framework

It is an undisputed fact that conflict affects more women and girls than any other group, but how the experience of conflict differs between sub-groups of women based on their social status and access to resources remains largely unstudied.¹⁹ Through a gender-informed analysis drawing from both postcolonial feminist theory and political economy theory, this thesis endeavors to illustrate the ways in which widows in particular are caught in the crossfires of armed conflict with few to no protective mechanisms.

1.1. Defining Widowhood

At its most rudimentary level, widowhood is defined as the status of a woman who has lost her spouse—to whom she was legally married—to death and not yet remarried.²⁰ However, many women find themselves in situations in which—while they may not be widowed in the traditional sense—they have been effectively widowed either temporarily or permanently. An entire discourse surrounds the definition of “real” marriages deserving of widowhood benefits or recognition after-the-fact. For example, if a girl was abducted into becoming a bush wife against her will and her husband was then killed leading up to the disarmament process, how is she to be classified in peacetime? If it was not a civil marriage, is she still to receive the legal protections and financial benefits promised to widows? Having been forced illegally into sexual service, the family she is returned to may view her as a source of shame, ultimately forcing her out on her own. Authorities may wish not to legitimate a forced child marriage by designating her a widow, but in failing to do so they leave her to face the challenges of what effectively remains widowhood on her own. In the varying context of community mores and state-specific legal systems, defining widowhood remains an ongoing debate.

For the purpose of applicability, this thesis focuses exclusively on the experience of widows who identify as women. This includes women and girls of all ages who have lost a partner to old age, abandonment, disease, conflict or other causes, or who have had a partner forcibly disappeared. This is not to discount the very real lived experiences of male and non-binary widowed individuals, but simply a necessary parameter given the variation in widowhood practices across identity groups and the bounds of this research. Across many regions of the world and various areas of Cameroon—the country focus of this thesis—formal civil marriage is uncommon due to limited access to the judicial system and preference towards customary law. The definition used in this thesis therefore does not require the presence of a marriage certificate.

¹⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

²⁰ *Merriam Webster*, “Widow,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/widow>.

1.2. Taking a Postcolonial Feminist and Political Economy Approach

Widows are a dually marginalized group, facing discrimination both for their gender and their civil status.²¹ A gender-informed approach is therefore critical to examining widowhood in the context of armed conflict, for which an established definition of gender is also necessary in order to discuss widowhood as an identity which both receives and informs a widow's experience of her womanhood.

Defined by the Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) as “socially constructed and conditioned roles, attributes, opportunities and norms that a given society at a given time considers appropriate based on biological sex,” gender informs nearly all aspects of life.²² Conceptions of gender are critical to distributions of power and relational dynamics, influencing access to opportunities and resources ranging from agricultural land to education.

Ever-changing in its meaning and implications, gender has become a highly contested topic in international dialogues. While I have used DCAF's definition of the term for the purposes of my research, many different definitions of gender exist. With no universally agreed-upon definition, it has become a buzzword used by academic, political, and humanitarian institutions alike in their sloganization of gender mainstreaming or diversifying campaigns.²³ For many policymakers, gender is simply a more neutral word for ‘women,’ and anything falling under the category of “gender issues” is really just “women's issues.”²⁴ For others, it involves both men and women equally. For example, Carol Cohn considers the disarmament process in post-conflict communities where male former soldiers have come to base their masculinity upon the possession and use of armed weapons a “gender issue.”²⁵ The way these men's experience as combatants has influenced their interactions with their peers—male and otherwise—post-conflict might also be considered a gender issue.

Societal constitutions of gender determine how both women and men are viewed in war, not only by enemy combatants, but also by political leaders, humanitarian aid workers, and policy makers.²⁶ This gendering of war is often overlooked, but it is critical that policymakers recognize that women and men experience the same phenomena in different ways. If men and women have different

²¹ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025, Webex.

²² Amrita Kapur et al., *Gender, Preventing Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism*, with Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces et al. (DCAF, 2019), 2.

²³ Andrea Cornwall et al., “Introduction: Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges,” in *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges* (Zed Books, 2007), 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350220089>.

²⁴ Carol Cohn, “Women and Wars: Toward a Conceptual Framework,” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 3.

²⁵ Cohn, “Toward a Conceptual Framework,” 3.

²⁶ Cohn, “Toward a Conceptual Framework,” 8.

meaning to their communities and to their opponents, these differences will inform the ways in which they are targeted. They may have differing responsibilities to their dependents, and therefore will encounter harm in different ways. Their resulting injuries will have different repercussions upon their communities. And if they have differing degrees of access to property, inheritance and the cash economy, they have different means of ensuring their families' livelihoods.²⁷

In a feminist analysis, war does not begin with the first exchange of gunfire or end with the signing of treaties.²⁸ It begins when a girl is taken out of primary school to care for her younger siblings, because her parents can no longer afford school fees for both her and her brother, and due to social custom they choose to prioritize her brother's education over her own.²⁹ War begins when she and her sisters are forced to venture farther and farther to fetch water and firewood for the family due to deterioration and drought, making them increasingly vulnerable to rape and kidnapping as militant groups proliferate the region. War begins when her government legalizes the marriage of girls at age thirteen, and she is married to a far older man, because her family feels it is the only reliable source of physical and economic security for her. War begins when she is abused by her husband, but her community dismisses any such accusations as trivial or customary. A woman's war begins when upon her husband's death, she can claim no right to the inheritance he has left behind, and she is left destitute and entirely dependent on her family-in-law for the livelihoods of both herself and her children. Each of these allegedly 'pre-war' events constitute the beginning of her war, because they create the conditions which will shape how she experiences armed conflict.³⁰

War is not a discrete event existing in a contained location or with a definitive beginning and ending, and it is not the "quintessentially masculine realm" that it has traditionally been described as.³¹ Women have always been present in battle zones. If not visible in ranks, they can inevitably be found in nearby camps, medical bases, and along critical transportation routes—serving as combatants, nurses, clerics, sex workers, wives, mothers, drivers, teachers, porters, messengers, spies, smugglers, sex slaves, or "bush wives."³²

When examining the political and socio-economic implications of war, the women mentioned above are often the hardest hit. Some of the most long-lasting consequences of war are the livelihood systems significantly altered or destroyed by conflict and displacement. In her discussion on the political economy of war, Raven-Roberts links the militarization process to what she calls a "predatory patriarchy," by which masculinities are reconstructed around violence and aggression and entire livelihoods are militarized.³³ Wartime only further exacerbates existing

²⁷ Cohn, "Toward a Conceptual Framework," 22.

²⁸ Cohn, "Toward a Conceptual Framework," 21.

²⁹ Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, 15.

³⁰ Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, 15.

³¹ Cohn, "Toward a Conceptual Framework," 2 & 21.

³² Cohn, "Toward a Conceptual Framework," 23.

³³ Angela Raven-Roberts, "Women and the Political Economy of War," in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 50.

sexual divisions of labor and resource access. For example, if only men can own and inherit land and household assets such as animals or farm tools, or obtain credit from state institutions, then only men can represent their families when collecting welfare or relief benefits.³⁴ Female-headed households – having lost their male heads-of-household either temporarily or permanently – face dual economic pressures of war and gender inequality. Systems of support and “social insurance” intended to preserve households throughout crisis – such as a reliance on extended kin networks – can rupture in wartime, leaving women even more vulnerable in their efforts to support their families alone, and more likely to turn to the informal economy.³⁵

Armed conflict and widowhood are both inherently gendered experiences, and deeply informed by socially constructed hierarchies of power. In analyzing the relationship between gender and contemporary armed conflict, reflection on the role of colonial legacies is also essential. In her discussion on the problem of rapidly rising international displacement, Giles notes that the majority of contemporary wars in the global South were preceded by 19th and 20th century (often violent) struggles for decolonial independence.³⁶ In terms of the case studied here, many analyses attribute Cameroon’s lasting instability to a harmful colonial history resulting in enduring political tensions between the country’s Francophone majority and Anglophone minority.³⁷ A country with a “bijural” structure left over from its period of dual colonization, Cameroon has two legal systems, having inherited not only French civil law from its Francophone colonizers, but also the English common law system left behind by British colonizers in the western regions of the country.³⁸ Add to this Cameroon’s own customary justice systems predating colonial imposition of received legal schemes, and it makes for a confusing legal system that many choose not to engage with at all, opting for traditional marriage ceremonies which are never registered with the state, and settling disputes locally via community elders and mediators.³⁹ A decolonial perspective will therefore be central to my analysis of the situation of widows in Cameroon’s Anglophone regions, in addition to elements drawn from both feminist and political economy theory.

1.3. Pathways to Radicalization

As this thesis aims to analyze the ways in which widowhood can in certain cases make women and/or their children more vulnerable to radicalization by armed groups, clear definitions for the terms ‘radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’ must be established. Ndung’u and Shadung define radicalization as “the process through which individuals or groups develop or become susceptible

³⁴ Raven-Roberts, “Women and the Political Economy of War,” 42.

³⁵ Raven-Roberts, “Women and the Political Economy of War,” 43 & 45.

³⁶ Wenona Giles, “Women Forced to Flee: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons,” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 85.

³⁷ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis,’” *U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants*, March 28, 2025, <https://refugees.org/timeline-cameroon-the-anglophone-crisis/>.

³⁸ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

³⁹ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 4.

to extremist ideologies.”⁴⁰ They warn that the radicalization process may precede violent extremism, which they define as “a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature.”⁴¹

Building off of existing literature on preventing violent extremism (PVE) and counterterrorism (CT), Chapter 6 will examine the connection between widowhood and various push factors increasing the likelihood of radicalization.⁴² Some data and literature does exist on the radicalization of children of single female-headed households, but it is very rarely further disaggregated – a gap which this thesis endeavors to begin to address.

1.4. Why the Anglophone Crisis?

Described by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) as a “case study in global neglect,” Cameroon’s ongoing Anglophone Crisis has received chronically insufficient international media coverage and humanitarian funding, placing it at the top of NRC’s 2024 list of neglected displacement crises.⁴³ Dealing with three separate humanitarian emergencies within its borders—violence and displacement due to protracted conflict with armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin (Far North Region), ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions, and an influx of refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR)—Cameroon is facing ever-rising political tensions as it nears its next presidential, legislative and local elections in 2025.⁴⁴

An estimated 2.2 million people across Cameroon require humanitarian assistance, hundreds of thousands of which are women and children.⁴⁵ Of the estimated 573,900 Cameroonians displaced by the Anglophone conflict in particular, 60% are women and children.⁴⁶ Very little research exists on the particularities of that population, as even today women are often grouped into a general ‘womenandchildren’ category for humanitarian purposes, with little initiative to disaggregate the data further.⁴⁷ But legislative and humanitarian work requires tailoring to the particular and diverse socio-economic situations of specific demographics, which in many regions are significantly informed by marital status. The Global Fund for Widows (GFW) estimated in 2020 that there were

⁴⁰ Irene Ndung’u and Mothepa Shadung, *Can a Gendered Approach Improve Responses to Violent Extremism?*, 5, Africa in the World (Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 3.

⁴¹ Ndung’u and Shadung, *Can a Gendered Approach Improve Responses to Violent Extremism?*, 3.

⁴² Magnus Ranstorp and Marije Meines, *The Root Causes of Violent Extremism* (European Commission, 2024), 4, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/63770ad9-8c0b-44c4-a568-254bb22a8009_en?filename=ran_root_causes_of_violent_extremism_ranstorp_meines_july_2024.pdf.

⁴³ 2024: *The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crises* (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025), 9.

⁴⁴ 2024: *The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crises*; “Canada Initiative Offers Opportunity for Cameroon Peace Process,” *International Crisis Group*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/canada-initiative-offers-opportunity-cameroon-peace-process>.

⁴⁵ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict* | *International Crisis Group* (2022), 1 & 5, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/rebels-victims-peacebuilders-women-cameroons-anglophone-conflict>.

⁴⁶ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

⁴⁷ Giles, “Women Forced to Flee,” 95.

between 600,000 and 800,000 widows residing in Cameroon.⁴⁸ This number has only increased as the situation has worsened and many more lives have been lost in the five years since.⁴⁹

The Anglophone Crisis deserves far more attention in all respects from the international community than it has thus far received, but the conflict's widows in particular remain chronically ignored and underrepresented. While Cameroon does already have certain laws in place establishing specific protections for widows, they are not enforced in practice—demonstrating a sharp dissonance between statutory and customary law.⁵⁰ Through an analysis of the experience of widows in this conflict, this thesis aims to shed light on not only the unique challenges attached to this silent “epidemic of widowhood,” but on the ways in which these women can one day become “agents of peacebuilding and resilience.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Jack Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa's Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis* (Global Fund for Widows, 2020), <https://www.globalfundforwidows.org/research/the-widows-of-cameroon>.

⁴⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

⁵⁰ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

⁵¹ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources”; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

2. Methodologies

This study employed a qualitative research design to analyze the unique vulnerabilities and possible pathways to radicalization of widows and their dependents in zones of armed conflict. Informed primarily by extensive desk research, preliminary research was enhanced by 10 key informant interviews with widows and experts in academia, legislation, and the humanitarian sector.

The first stage of research involved review of existing literature on the topic of widowhood both in peacetime and in the context of armed conflict. As very little literature exists on the topic of widowhood, and even less in the context of conflict, this review was meant to be as intersectional as possible, drawing from policy papers, constitutions, interdisciplinary academic works, non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, regional journalism, and international media. My goal was to explore the various ways in which women in general can face stigmatization and disenfranchisement in patriarchal societies—which have already been established in the gender discourse—and to take the analysis of these systems of discrimination a step further by examining them in the context of widowhood specifically. Key areas reviewed include Cameroonian structures of marriage and land tenure systems, documented cases of property disenfranchisement following widowhood, and gendered analyses of armed conflict and development. This study on contemporary widowhood in Cameroon involves an analysis of the historical and cultural narratives surrounding women, which inform both statutory and customary law and only become further apparent once a woman is widowed. For later use in my final analysis of the possible implications this work can have for PVE, this stage also included a brief review of the existing literature surrounding the radicalization process.

Preliminary desk research was further contextualized by 10 interviews conducted in the months of April, May, June, and July. All interviews remained semi structured around ten to fifteen guiding questions tailored to the individual's background and area of expertise.⁵² All but one individual—who will be referred to as 'Interviewee A'—agreed to disclose their names for the purpose of this thesis, as well as to recording of the conversations for accuracy. Meetings were held on Webex, in addition to phone calls on WhatsApp in cases where the connection was not stable enough for a video call. In the three cases where due to ongoing conflict the connection was not stable enough for a call, surveys were conducted through the sending of a questionnaire and receiving of either written or recorded responses.

Interviewees were selected based on availability and location. Drawing from partner organization GFW's existing network of field officers and partner programs, four interviews were conducted for a contextualization of some of the most common challenges faced by widows globally, and the

⁵² All questionnaires used in interviews can be found in the appendix. To respect the privacy of the individuals interviewed, transcripts are not included.

international community's perception (or lack thereof) of their situation. The first individual interviewed was Fredrick Onyambu, GFW's Kenya program director, who offered further background on the work that GFW does in particular, and the key obstacles they face in both the Kenyan and broader African context. This discussion was followed by interviews with Veronica Ngechu and Rose Muthoni, two Kenyan widows participating in GFW programs in Nairobi – facilitated by GFW partner Kenneth Ndungu. One of GFW's most critical partners in Kenya is Dianah Kamande, founder and executive director of the Come Together Widows and Orphans Organization (CTWOO), who also agreed to an interview. A widow herself since 2013, Kamande is one of Kenya's leading activists for widow's rights, having spearheaded legislative reform and the creation of new programs for widows and their children, centered around a reclaiming of their dignity.⁵³ These four interviews were critical in demonstrating the impact of existing efforts towards widow's rights, and laying the groundwork for policy-informed questions asked of my Cameroonian interviewees. All four were conducted over Webex.

Six interviews were then conducted with widows and researchers either originally from or currently residing in Cameroon. With the help of GFW and their partner Emelda Ndinjiakat, I was put in contact with two widows residing in the North West Region (NWR) who were willing to share their experiences: Wopsen Grace (from here on referred to as Ma Wopsen) and Mulam Emilia Atangchua (Ma Mulam). Due to regional instability, we were unable to meet online, and instead communicated via email through Ndinjiakat, a pediatric nurse and founder of the Grace Gardens Women Health Association (GGWHA) and Widows of Grace (WoG) Cameroon.

I was later put in contact with Dr. Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, a psychotherapist and coordinator of the Mission 21 Trauma Healing and Resilience Center, working in the NWR of Cameroon. In my preliminary research, I came across many articles by Cameroonian journalist Tony Vinyoh reporting on the situation in the NWR and South West Region (SWR). I reached out to him, and he gave me Dr. Wango's contact information. After having spoken to widows about their first-hand experiences in the conflict, Dr. Wango's perspective added another dimension to my analysis, providing the expertise of a medical professional working in the region and specifically tasked with helping these women. Due to unstable network connection, we used WhatsApp voice messages for our interview.

The Anglophone Crisis remains chronically underreported. There is therefore relatively little up-to-date literature on the ongoing conflict, and even less on the topic of widowhood in Cameroon – both in and out of the conflict zone. One study which greatly informed my preliminary research on traditional practices surrounding widowhood in western Cameroon was Pemunta and Alubafi's 2016 study on the "The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women's Human Rights in

⁵³ Bibbi Abruzzini and Clarisse Sih, "Reclaiming Power: Dianah Kamande's Inspiring Journey from Survivor to Advocate for Justice," *Forus*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.forus-international.org/en/custom-page-detail/124819-reclaiming-power-dianah-kamandes-inspiring-journey-from-survivor-to-advocate-for-justice>.

Cameroon.”⁵⁴ I reached out to both of them to discuss how the situation has changed for widows in the region since the conflict began in 2017. Dr. Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, now based in Sweden and lecturing in public health and community medicine at the University of Gothenburg, offered critical insight on the harmful widowhood rites and practices (WRP) in the area, and how these have worsened with the conflict.⁵⁵ Now a senior research specialist in the Developmental, Capable and Ethical State (DCES) Division of the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa, Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi added to Pemunta’s contributions and further illuminated widowhood’s impact on children of the Anglophone Crisis. Due to poor connection, the interview with Dr. Pemunta was held over WhatsApp. The interview with Dr. Alubafi was conducted using Webex.

Dr. Pemunta was also able to put me in contact with a research colleague from the NWR. Choosing to remain anonymous, this individual will be referred to as ‘Interviewee A’ and remain genderless in my analysis. A social worker and researcher working in the sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) of women and having grown up the child of a widow, they provided two essential additional perspectives to this study. This interview was held over Webex.

While grounded in literature review due to the practical limitations of this study, my research was greatly enhanced by these 10 interviews, providing firsthand perspectives of professionals as well as widows themselves.

⁵⁴ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon.”

⁵⁵ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 1.

3. Limitations

As previously mentioned, the greatest constraint of this study was the limited existing literature on the topic of widowhood in general, and on Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis. As widowhood remains an understudied topic, it can be difficult to find region-specific data, particularly in ongoing conflict zones. Furthermore, widowhood customs vary greatly across ethnic and religious communities. Cameroon is home to more than 240 tribes—very few of which are mentioned in existing literature on WRP across the country.⁵⁶ This unfortunately limits the depth of my research, and leaves much to be developed in future research endeavors.

Another significant limitation which must be mentioned is the extent to which my theoretical framework was informed by GFW's contacts, which are primarily in Kenya. This is why Section 4 is more descriptive of the experience of Kenyan widows, as those are the examples which GFW was able to provide in my preliminary research.

This research was also limited in the extent of the resources to which I had access. I did not have the financial or material resources to conduct field research for this project, nor was I able to conduct more than 10 interviews within the timeframe of my research. This greatly reduced the applicability of any generalizations drawn from these interviews on a larger scale. There is also the practical limitation of internet instability in the NWR and SWR, for which I adapted interview structures accordingly as explained in the previous section. Similarly, given the time frame of this research project, I did not have the resources to explore more than one case study. I therefore chose to focus exclusively on the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, from which it is impossible to draw conclusions applicable to widows in a truly international context. However, I felt that applying a study of widowhood to one limited region would produce more accurate and detailed results than attempting to make broad generalizations across multiple regions given the bounds of this project. I hope that this localized study will be able to inform more large-scale analyses of widowhood practices in the future.

The Anglophone Crisis is not Cameroon's only source of instability at the moment, as the country is also facing another ongoing conflict with Boko Haram and other armed Islamist groups in its Far North region and along its shared border with Nigeria.⁵⁷ For the purpose of this thesis and due to its limitations in size and breadth, I have focused exclusively on the Anglophone Crisis.

While not necessarily a limitation, I would also like to establish why I have made the choice to group widows and their children together for the purpose of examining vulnerability to radicalization. The stigmatization of widows is something deeply rooted in many cultures, and in

⁵⁶ "Cameroon," *Republic of Cameroon: Presidency of the Republic*, n.d., <https://www.prc.cm/en/cameroon>; Pemunta and Alubafi, "The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women's Human Rights in Cameroon," 1.

⁵⁷ "Cameroon: Populations at Risk," *Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/cameroon/>.

nearly all cases the challenges faced by widows extend beyond themselves to their children.⁵⁸ While they may encounter different options once facing the financial and physical insecurity often associated with widowhood, both widowed mothers and their dependents must grapple with both the initial and long-lasting, private and public implications of widowhood. In Kamande's words, "they are discriminated altogether, no one is left behind."⁵⁹ If a woman loses access to resources and housing after her husband's death, so too do her children. If she faces stigmatization and ostracization, so do her children. If she is accused of witchcraft and playing a role in her husband's death, her children are accused of being the children of a witch.⁶⁰ The experiences of a woman and her children following the death of a male head-of-household are deeply interconnected, and while solutions must be tailored to their differences, they must also draw from each other in supporting the entire family as a whole. While any future endeavors would more clearly separate the two groups, this research attempts to examine the possibilities for radicalization of both widows and their children in the context of armed conflict between militant groups and state armed forces. However, this is meant only to be used as a starting point, and as proof that this is an area worthy of far more research in the future.

⁵⁸ "Interview with Interviewee A," June 20, 2025, Webex.

⁵⁹ Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

⁶⁰ "Interview A," June 20, 2025.

4. Widowhood on the International Stage: A Historically Ignored and Invisibilized Humanitarian Crisis

“For the purposes of the present Convention, the term ‘**discrimination against women**’ shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, *irrespective of their marital status*, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field [emphasis added].”⁶¹

- Article 1, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*
(CEDAW, 1979)

The world is facing what GFW calls a “global epidemic of widowhood”: a situation universal to all communities which practice civil unions, but extremely diverse in its social reception.⁶² However, an overwhelming absence of key actors explicitly dedicated to the rights and protection of widows leaves them largely voiceless at the global level. Issues surrounding widowhood remain absent from international human rights dialogues, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the case of conflict widows, even existing humanitarian organizations which might support widows are not specialized enough or equipped with the resources to address the unique challenges faced by those widowed by conflict (such as the particular and complex grief due to the nature of their loss and the instability of their situation, the social stigma attached to their position based on who their husband was and their position in the conflict, and the structural poverty and insecurity of war). This chapter reviews the very limited existing international discourse on widowhood, providing an overview of some of the most universal challenges faced by widows around the world, ultimately leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation.

It should seem impossible to discuss the escalating frequency of armed conflict without also discussing widowhood. Widowhood can rise to a rate of 80% in active conflict zones, to the extent that contemporary refugee camps host specific ‘widow camps,’ such as Camp of the Widows and Orphans in Aarsal, Lebanon to Widows Village in Idlib, Syria or Camp of the Widow in Hakimpura, Bangladesh.⁶³ In spite of this, facing even greater stigmatization and ostracization in conflict/post-conflict zones compared to in peacetime, widows often remain unseen due to displacement, poor documentation, and unconventional means of widowhood (such as enforced disappearances and

⁶¹ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979).
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1979/en/13757>.

⁶² Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

⁶³ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

extrajudicial killings).⁶⁴ This is clearly reflected in the international discourse surrounding gender and conflict, from which they are consistently excluded.

One of the most foundational resolutions to the WPS Agenda following UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2001), UNSCR 2242 (2015) recognizes the “differential role and impact of terrorism and violent extremism on the human rights of women.”⁶⁵ However, there is no further recognition of the varied ways in which violent extremism (VE) can affect different categories of women, based on intersectional identities informed by age, sex, income, race, religion, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and marital status among many other factors.⁶⁶ Likewise, the issue of child widowhood went entirely overlooked by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and remains ignored by the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a call for the elimination of all harmful practices—including child, early and forced marriage as well as female genital mutilation (FGM)—but does not make any mention of widows in particular.⁶⁷ Similarly, the UN aims to achieve “gender equality” through the empowerment of women and girls in Goal 5 of its seventeen SDGs.⁶⁸ But women and girls constitute half of the world’s population, and “all women and girls” is an overwhelming, massive category. With little to no differentiation between more specific subgroups of underrepresented or disadvantaged women, millions of women and girls continue to fall through cracks in the most prominent international human rights mechanisms.

Lost in the larger category of “women and girls” defined by Goal 5 as described above, the 350 million estimated widows worldwide remain largely unseen by the international community.⁶⁹ Those with first-hand experience or exposure to work on widowhood might manage to find widows in the discussion surrounding the issue of child, early, and forced marriage, as the practice of early marriage to an older man increases a girl’s likelihood of early widowhood, and the practice of levirate marriage enforces marriage to a woman’s brother-in-law or father-in-law following widowhood.⁷⁰ However, these connections require a far deeper understanding of the topic, and are therefore not made in most high-level discussions. When international humanitarian missions do not bother to further disaggregate the diverse situations of those whom they seek to help, they fail to effectively tailor their programs to the differing needs of those most at risk.

⁶⁴ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

⁶⁵ UNSCR 2242 (2015), Resolution 2242 (2015), U.N. Security Council 7533rd, S/RES/2242 (2015) (2015); Ndung’u and Shadung, *Can a Gendered Approach Improve Responses to Violent Extremism?*, 4.

⁶⁶ Marijke Kremin, “Addressing the Situation of Widows: What It Means & What’s next,” *Global Fund for Widows*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.globalfundforwidows.org/news/unga-res-what-it-means-whats-next>.

⁶⁷ Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1, UNGA 70 (2015).

⁶⁸ “The 17 Goals,” *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, n.d., <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁶⁹ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

⁷⁰ Nyongkah Rachel Tati, “Widowhood Rituals and Widow Inheritance in the Balikumbat, Cameroon,” *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 58, <https://doi.org/10.20431/2454-7654.0401004>.

“Noting with regret” the dearth in disaggregated data and information regarding widowhood, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted its first ever resolution on widowhood on 16 March 2022.⁷¹ The only piece of international legislation to ever address widowhood as a human rights issue, this resolution directly linked the topic of widowhood to the SDGs, the discourse surrounding child, early, and forced marriage, and the WPS agenda.⁷² However, there have been no further international discussions at this level concerning widowhood in the three years since.

4.1. Common Challenges Faced by Widows and Their Children Across Societies

The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines *violence against women* as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁷³ Facing not only socio-economic stigmatization but also legal discrimination on the grounds of their altered marital status (or administrative lack thereof in cases where their marriage was not civilly registered), widows and their children are among the many victims of S/GBV whom this declaration is meant to empower.

While subject to cultural variation, several persistent harmful narratives can be found in widowhood practices around the world, which are briefly mentioned here before continuing on to a more expansive analysis of the particular context of Anglophone Cameroon. Similar challenges faced by widows across borders can be catalogued into groupings of social, legal, and economic obstacles.

A. Social

Upon losing her partner, a woman must first and foremost adjust to the grief she is left with, as well as her new role as head of household both within her home and in her larger community. In areas where mental health is underserved or ignored, she may be left to manage the pain of loss on her own or with incredibly limited psychosocial resources—creating a sense of isolation which only furthers feelings of hopelessness and despair.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Addressing the Situation of Widows, Res. 76/252, U.N. General Assembly 76th (2022).

⁷² Kremin, “Addressing the Situation of Widows: What It Means & What’s next”; Addressing the Situation of Widows.

⁷³ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 48/104, UNGA (1993). <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/eliminationvaw.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Fredrick Onyambu, “Interview with Fredrick Onyambu,” April 15, 2025, Webex; Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview with Dr Yvette Wango,” May 16, 2025, Telephone.

In patriarchal societies, women experience a lowering of their social status following the death of their husband (compared to male widowers, who are rarely defined by their marital status).⁷⁵ Common experiences following widowhood include severe ostracization and stigma, as the widow becomes a harbinger of bad fortune and unhappiness to her community. This change in treatment can also extend to her children. Kamande describes it as though one carries a terrible smell with her, with which no one wants to be associated.⁷⁶ Former friends and acquaintances ignore her, and neighbors no longer allow their children to play with her children for fear of spreading bad luck.⁷⁷

Ngechu feels that one of the most significant results of Kamande's empowerment efforts in Kenya is a restoration of self-recognition as human beings. Echoing the words of the other widows interviewed both in Kenya and in Cameroon, she says that recovering a sense of self-worth and emotional strength is one of the most difficult feats following widowhood, as it feels as though one's identity as a woman has been overwritten by their newly acquired widow status.⁷⁸ Muthoni similarly reports the feeling of being "viewed as a person again" by her community following the economic empowerment she has gained from CTWOO programs—a feeling which she had lost when left widowed with her seven children and no longer allowed in the home she had shared with her husband.⁷⁹

Widows are also often subject to various harmful traditional practices (HTP), dependent on the region and community within which they reside. In societies where women are considered wards of their husbands or fathers, they are often still seen as the prerogative of their families in-law even after their husband's death, and therefore theirs to do with that they will.⁸⁰ In the Kenyan context, Kamande explains that a man is considered to be a "perimeter wall" protecting his wife, and that "once that perimeter wall is fallen, then a woman is naked."⁸¹ In other words, she is perceived as entirely defenseless, or "caught with her pants down"—in all senses of the term—once widowed.⁸² In her description of the situation of widowhood in Cameroon, Wango similarly describes a man as a 'cover' to his wife. In her words, once he has died, "it feels like the roof of the house, the protecting shield of the house has been taken off, and the woman is left to face perpetrators [alone]."⁸³ She is left with few options, and vulnerable to familial pressure into levirate marriage, by which she might be forcibly given to a brother in-law so as to keep her late husband's assets within the family and continue reproduction. Kamande argues that this treatment of women as

⁷⁵ Akyol, "As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources."

⁷⁶ Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

⁷⁷ Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

⁷⁸ Veronica Ngechu, "Interview with Veronica Ngechu," April 15, 2025, Webex.

⁷⁹ Rose Muthoni, "Interview with Rose Muthoni," April 15, 2025, Webex.

⁸⁰ Acronym adopted from Pemunta and Alubafi (HTP)

⁸¹ Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

⁸² Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

⁸³ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

family property is not unique to Kenya, but endemic to many African countries, including Cameroon.⁸⁴

B. Economic

Due to socially constructed expectations and limitations surrounding gendered divisions of labor, women-headed households—defined as homes “without an able-bodied, working-age adult male”—have proven to be more likely to face impoverishment than households led by adult men.⁸⁵ This has become a dominant narrative in the gender discourse, critical to outlining and addressing the challenges faced by women in the context of development, but far too often facilitating a relegation of *all* women-headed households to the “poorest of the poor” requiring the same uniform sort of aid and in no need of further disaggregation.⁸⁶

In her discussion on the danger of grouping all homes led by female heads-of-household into one gross category, Sylvia Chant examines the “feminization of poverty” in developmental frameworks since the 1990s.⁸⁷ Moghadam’s 1997 review of this phenomenon attributes women’s greater likelihood of living in poverty, compared to men, to three key factors. The first concerns women’s disadvantage in terms of entitlements and social capabilities across many regions. Women residing in communities with strongly enforced divisions of labor or gendered partitions between the public and private sphere enjoy fewer paths to economic empowerment, leaving them far more vulnerable to long-term poverty. Secondly, women typically have heavier workloads but lower earnings, due to the degree to which they perform unpaid domestic labor. Thirdly, as previously mentioned, women are more likely to face constraints upon their socio-economic mobility due to cultural, legal, and labor market-related barriers. These gender-informed disparities in rights, entitlements and capabilities make it far more difficult for women who lack a “breadwinning” partner and do not receive the contributions of an adult male’s salary to support their dependents.⁸⁸

However, this simplistic “heterogeneity of female-headed households” is a fiction, and Chant warns that “[i]n the broader work on poverty, and especially in policy circles, the poverty of female-headed households has effectively become a proxy for women’s poverty, if not poverty in

⁸⁴ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

⁸⁵ Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, 9.

⁸⁶ Cornwall et al., “Introduction: Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges,” 4.

⁸⁷ Sylvia Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” in *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall et al. (Zed Books, 2007), 35, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350220089>; Cornwall et al., “Introduction: Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges,” 5.

⁸⁸ Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” 36.

general, a set of ‘dangerous equations’ which have been increasingly challenged.”⁸⁹ The links between female household headship and poverty are not as definitive as often argued, and certainly more varied.⁹⁰ Chant establishes this equation of single female-headed households with the poorest of the poor to be an ‘orthodoxy’ in gender and development literature, from which it becomes very difficult to further distinguish who needs what and how best to get it to them.⁹¹

In the case of widowed women, all of the challenges listed above apply, in addition to those shaped by cultural taboos and practices surrounding widowhood. Because of the severe limitations placed on their mobility and access to society during the mourning period following widowhood, there is an even greater risk for these women of falling into—and struggling to exit—poverty.

There are many unforeseen costs to becoming the primary provider for one’s family, regardless of how they have been left without a contributing partner. One solution to economic insecurity employed by many single female heads-of-household is accepting temporary or long-term invitations of co-residence by extended family.⁹² However, this is rarely an option for widows if they face community-wide stigmatization and ostracization by their extended families. While some single mothers choose to rely on financial provisions by their sons, many women experience widowhood for the first time at a young age with small children who have not yet reached working age.⁹³ Others lose their children following widowhood if their in-laws have the desire and power to take them away from them.⁹⁴

One of the most universal obstacles faced by women following widowhood is disinheritance of their marital home and property, to be discussed further in the following section on the legal obstacles of widowhood. Related to this however, is a widespread difficulty in accessing widowhood or survivor’s pensions. While constitutional protections exist in most if not all countries for widows and widowers, these provisions are often extremely difficult to access in practice, requiring legal knowledge that the average citizen does not possess.⁹⁵ In regions where customary marriages are more common (without visit to a court or acquirement of a marriage certificate), accessing such programs becomes impossible.

⁸⁹ Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” 35.

⁹⁰ Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” 38.

⁹¹ Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” 35.

⁹² Chant, “Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions,” 38.

⁹³ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025, Webex.

⁹⁴ Rose Muthoni, “Interview with Rose Muthoni,” April 15, 2025.

⁹⁵ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

Faced with few to no employment options, many widows are forced to accept whatever sources of income they can find. Most tragically, widows may eventually find themselves complicit in HTP which they themselves were once victim of, as society offers them no alternative livelihoods other than prostitution of either themselves or their children. Kenya has twenty two hotspot regions where FGM is commonly practiced. In her work on sexual and reproductive health rights, Kamande has encountered several women who following widowhood took up professions in cutting girls—despite not necessarily agreeing with the practice—because they saw it as their only source of economic empowerment.⁹⁶ When given the tools with which to create alternative livelihoods through microfinance programs and the establishment of new businesses, they happily ceased practicing FGM for money. But without any alternative sources of income, they felt trapped.⁹⁷

Because of these limited employment options available to them and the HTP they are systemically subject to, widows are in general also more vulnerable to infection of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Widowed women make up 40% of the 12 million women living with HIV/AIDS in Eastern and Southern Africa.⁹⁸ Widows who struggle to find work and find themselves in high risk situations are at risk of infection through sexual violence, or through transactional sex during which they are unable to negotiate safer practices.⁹⁹ They have also been found to be more likely to be infected with HIV than those who have never been married, either through prior intercourse with their deceased spouse or through abuse and sex-related rites following widowhood.¹⁰⁰ For example, many widows report having been subject to “cleansing ceremonies” during which they are required to engage in sexual intercourse either with relatives or strangers. Alternatively, they are also vulnerable to infection if forced into levirate marriage to a relative who already has other regular sexual partners as well. With proven adverse economic effects on infected households, HIV/AIDS often introduces significant costs of care and losses in income, increasing potential impoverishment.¹⁰¹

As is also the case for the social effects of widowhood, the consequences of disinheritance and financial discrimination are not isolated to the widow herself, but often extend to her children as well. Poverty and food insecurity go hand in hand, and Kamande has witnessed countless women entering her programs clearly malnourished, but refusing to eat the food they are offered and

⁹⁶ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

⁹⁷ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

⁹⁸ Jackline A. Odhiambo et al., “Comparing the Effect of a Multisectoral Agricultural Intervention on HIV-Related Health Outcomes between Widowed and Married Women,” *Social Science & Medicine* 330 (August 2023): 116031, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116031>.

⁹⁹ Fatima Martin Sánchez and Mwila Agatha Zaza, “HIV Thrives Where Harmful Traditional Practices Subjugate Widows,” *Global Fund for Widows*, December 1, 2024, <https://www.globalfundforwidows.org/news/hiv-thrives-where-harmful-traditional-practices-subjugate-widows>.

¹⁰⁰ Sánchez and Zaza, “HIV Thrives Where Harmful Traditional Practices Subjugate Widows.”

¹⁰¹ Robert Greener, “The Impact of HIV/AIDS on Poverty and Inequality,” in *The Macroeconomics of HIV/AIDS*, ed. Markus Haacker (International Monetary Fund, 2004), 167–68.

instead trying to hide it away and take it home with them for their children.¹⁰² Many children are taken out of school because their mothers can no longer afford school fees following their disinheritance and require the extra help either in the home or in seeking means of financial support for their family.¹⁰³ For the majority of widows, their priority is to protect their children from the treatment they themselves are receiving. But if given no possible pathways to financial empowerment, it becomes impossible for them to help their children, let alone themselves.

¹⁰² Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

¹⁰³ Fredrick Onyambu, "Interview with Fredrick Onyambu," April 15, 2025.

C. Legal

In many cases, the laws enshrining widow rights already exist, but they are not being implemented. Due to a widespread lack of legal knowledge and the limited education of many widowed women, the majority are not initially aware of their fundamental rights, and therefore are unable to recognize when those rights are being violated.¹⁰⁴ In the Kenyan case illustrated by Kamande, she argues that while the national law of succession was explicitly created for lower class women, they have not been the ones profiting from it. When asked to speak to the role of legal aid in the empowerment of widowed women, she responded with the biblical phrase “[m]y people perish from a lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6), underscoring the fact that many of the women whom she encounters do not realize that the abuse they are experiencing is illegal, and therefore are unable to contest it.¹⁰⁵

In theory, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol) adopted by the African Union in 2005 ensures a widow’s right to make her own decisions regarding when and whom to re-marry.¹⁰⁶ In practice, however, this is rarely the case. The custom of levirate marriage mentioned above (also called widow inheritance to reflect its purpose) can be quite common particularly in rural areas. If widows do not know their rights, they do not believe that they are worth more than inheritance by their next-of-kin.¹⁰⁷ The financial instability so common to widowhood means that in addition to a lack of communal support, disenfranchised widows often don’t have the economic resources to take their case to court.¹⁰⁸ This combined with a limited understanding of their rights makes it incredibly difficult for widows to advocate for themselves in cases of insecurity and mistreatment.

In the rare situation that they do have the means to bring their case to court, widows must then grapple with the reality of being considered one dependent among the many other relatives competing for inheritance of the assets of the deceased (which can include other wives and their children, parents in-law, siblings in-law, etc.).¹⁰⁹ Kamande has encountered multiple cases of women having no knowledge of their late husband’s other families until after his death, upon which they must confront them while trying to lay claim to the marital home from which they have been thrown out.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Fredrick Onyambu, “Interview with Fredrick Onyambu,” April 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003).

¹⁰⁷ Veronica Ngechu, “Interview with Veronica Ngechu,” April 15, 2025; Fredrick Onyambu, “Interview with Fredrick Onyambu,” April 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

¹¹⁰ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to these women's reclamation of their inheritance and property is their lack of knowledge. Many widows report having been taken out of school at a young age to marry, and therefore never completed their basic education, to the extent that they may remain illiterate. With even minimal constitutional and civic education, they have a far greater awareness of their own legal rights, and the tools to advocate for themselves and their families.

Veronica Ngechu reports the forcible taking of her property which she herself experienced following her husband's death due to illness. She was left with no assets with which to support her five children, but with paralegal training was ultimately able to claim her husband's property and inheritance for her children.¹¹¹ Rose Muthoni gives a similar account of facing complete abandonment by her family in-law, who grabbed her marital land and property following her husband's death, and made several attempts to take her children away from her while they were in school.¹¹² Only after she had received similar paralegal and financial training and created her own business, was she able to regain recognition from her in-laws, whom she says have now returned what they took from her and no longer treat her "like a thief."¹¹³ Yet many widows never have the opportunity to acquire this knowledge of their rights as people or as widows, and are left with few if any resources to reclaim what has been stolen from them.

D. A note on the particular case of war widows

Widows suffer dual discrimination on the basis of both their widowhood and their gender, and while far greater attention must be paid to the harmful effects of their widowhood, we must not forget that they are first and foremost women. The combination of social isolation, economic handicap, and legal discrimination outlined above have proven to be entirely debilitating to many women's sense of humanity and self-worth following their widowhood. Regardless of the context in which they lost their partner, many widows who reside in a community with cultural stigma surrounding widowhood report experiencing feelings of deep isolation and guilt for their husband's death, due to the blame they are burdened with from their peers.

In the context of armed conflict, these women become not only dually but *triply* marginalized, facing discrimination on the basis of both their gender identity and civil status, combined with the insecurity of war. Between 60% and 90% of all deaths in contemporary conflict are those of civilians, many of which are women and their dependents who are forced to flee.¹¹⁴ As the responsibility of care for dependent children and the elderly falls to women in so many societies, wartime flight can become particularly urgent for them. But displacement brings with it many

¹¹¹ Veronica Ngechu, "Interview with Veronica Ngechu," April 15, 2025.

¹¹² Rose Muthoni, "Interview with Rose Muthoni," April 15, 2025.

¹¹³ Rose Muthoni, "Interview with Rose Muthoni," April 15, 2025.

¹¹⁴ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 83.

dangers, including the erosion of the kin-based networks critical to so many single female heads-of-household's survival.¹¹⁵

Similar to the issues surrounding the 'feminization of poverty,' the label of 'displaced women' casts an identity entirely shaped by deeply gendered power relations often forced upon these women in the eyes of the public.¹¹⁶ In most conflicts, women are less mobile and affluent than their male counterparts prior to flight.¹¹⁷ For example, women in *purdah* – the practice of concealing women from strangers and men for the purpose of their protection, through various degrees of clothing and physical isolation – are far more limited in their ability to flee disaster than their male peers.¹¹⁸

The gendered caregiving responsibilities of women can also reduce their ability to safely flee conflict. Mothers may be slowed down by the children or elderly family members whom they have been tasked with guarding, or they may repeatedly re-enter danger when sent to collect water and firewood. They may be compelled to take work in isolated farmlands, bushlands, or marketplaces where they are at an increased risk of S/GBV, or coerced into "survival sex" in exchange for food, shelter or protection.¹¹⁹ While faced by all women in conflict zones, these risks are intensified for widows due to the social isolation and stigmatization which they face, and their greater vulnerability to violence compared to peers with the protection of surviving spouses. Widows who must undergo cleansing rituals of prolonged isolation following their loss face similar restrictions. In cases where they have no male guardians left but are being monitored by their community, they may not have the option of flight.

Although humanitarian emergency assistance increased five-fold in the 1990s, long-term development aid stagnated and then dropped – creating a pattern of "band-aid treatments" which continues into developmental work today.¹²⁰ This means that many forced migration situations which were meant to be temporary have effectively become permanent lifestyles in long-term emergencies. Within these emergency settings, there is still very little differentiation on the part of humanitarian assistance organizations and peacebuilding efforts between the different occupant groups in need. Marginalized groups such as widows therefore remain entirely invisible, even in the spaces specifically created to help them. Giles describes a "continuum of violence" permeating gendered experiences in contemporary spaces of forced migration, including those of women who have been internally displaced as well as those who have entered protracted refugee situations or even resettlement.¹²¹ She warns of the "genderless stereotypes" often assigned to refugees prior to

¹¹⁵ Chant, "Dangerous Equations? How Female-Headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences, and Cautions," 36.

¹¹⁶ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 80.

¹¹⁷ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 86.

¹¹⁸ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 86.

¹¹⁹ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 86–87.

¹²⁰ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 85.

¹²¹ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 88.

the 1980s, contributing to the continued invisibility of women to humanitarian aid workers today.¹²²

Neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees provide any mention of women or gendered forms of violence and persecution. Interest eventually developed in the experience of women in forced migration, but with a very limited understanding of the challenges faced by women as defined by their attachment to their children.¹²³ Female migrants maintain a similar one-dimensionality in international development work today, due to the persisting gendered assumptions of humanitarian aid workers. If women are only perceived as dependents, then they too often become invisible to those tasked with helping them. For example, if a woman is not allowed out without a male escort, she is therefore unable to travel to collect aid and both her existence and her needs remain unknown to international actors. With their especially limited social networks and restricted mobility, widows are pushed even farther into invisibility.

Dangerous environments created by forced migration patterns, working in remote areas, and armed conflict also heighten the risk of HIV infection through sexual violence.¹²⁴ All forms of S/GBV are known to increase during conflict, including both opportunistic and political, systematic rape, as well as domestic violence.¹²⁵ With limited availability of basic health services due to the instability of war, victims of sexual assault in these areas face a higher chance of HIV infection going untreated and developing into the most advanced stage of the disease: acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).¹²⁶ Furthermore, less reliable access to health resources in wartime means that those infected with HIV may not know it and continue to spread it unintentionally.¹²⁷ With such limited options of employment, widows risk assault and infection through engagement in transactional sex for the sake of security, access to food and water, and financial security.¹²⁸ Due to their liminal social status and perceived lack of protection, widows and those in their care are also at an even greater risk of forced sex and infection by militia members, fellow displaced persons, security personnel, and humanitarian workers.¹²⁹

Victims of forced displacement must grapple with various life-altering identity transformations as they enter a life in limbo. Faced with the loss of friends, family, home, livelihoods, and belongings, families driven out of their homes must navigate economic hardship and the continued upbringing of their children in situations that are rarely safe or stable.¹³⁰ Widows struggle with the

¹²² Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 94, 87.

¹²³ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 94.

¹²⁴ Sánchez and Zaza, "HIV Thrives Where Harmful Traditional Practices Subjugate Widows."

¹²⁵ Pamela DeLargy, "Sexual Violence and Women's Health in War," in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 56.

¹²⁶ DeLargy, "Sexual Violence and Women's Health in War," 76.

¹²⁷ DeLargy, "Sexual Violence and Women's Health in War," 77.

¹²⁸ DeLargy, 76.

¹²⁹ DeLargy, "Sexual Violence and Women's Health in War," 76.

¹³⁰ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 92.

stigmatization and socio-economic limitations attached to widowhood *in addition to* those faced by all displaced people. The loss of personal documents critical to self-identification and registration – such as certificates of birth, marriage, private property ownership, and internally displaced person (IDP) cards – can make it impossible to access pensions, health care, and other social benefits.¹³¹ For widowed women struggling to provide for dependents on their own with limited to nonexistent social care networks in their area and few employment opportunities, the absence of such documents can make it near impossible for them to receive any sort of structural or institutional aid. These challenges and lack of support may render widows even more vulnerable to exploitation, and a potential progression into radicalization.

4.2. How Does Widowhood Increase Vulnerability and the Risk of Exploitation for Both the Widow and Her Children?

A persistent victim-perpetrator narrative exists in conversations surrounding gender and war, in which women are portrayed as victims of armed conflicts to be protected from male aggressors. While it does examine the particular ways in which widows are vulnerable in (and therefore victims of) wartime, this thesis also aims to move beyond this one-dimensional understanding of women in war by exploring the forms of empowerment available to widowed women and the ways in which they respond to these impossible situations. Ultimately, effective PVE strategies require a comprehensive understanding of the varying experiences which can make one vulnerable to recruitment. In isolating the unique challenges faced by widows and their dependents and their potential for exploitation by community-members and armed actors, this research endeavors to contribute to that improved understanding.

When faced with the assumption of head-of-household, combined with a lack of protection, a lack of education, disinheritance and financial instability, and few empowerment options in a region already destabilized by armed conflict, widowed women may feel they have no choice but to seek protection and resources in one of the surrounding armed groups in order to have their basic needs met. It all depends on the options – or lack thereof – available to them. However, this possible pathway to radicalization has not been studied at all, meaning that if it is a source for possible recruitment, no PVE measures have yet taken this into account.

¹³¹ Akyol, “As War Widow Population Grows, So Does Need for Resources.”

5. The General Situation of Widows in Cameroon

Home to more than 800,000 widows, Cameroon observes a long-standing custom of discrimination, disinheritance, and pervasive HTP surrounding widowhood. Traditionally considered to have been bought with their dowry and therefore belonging to their husband, Cameroonian women often remain seen as the property of their husband's extended family even after his death.¹³² While national and international awareness surrounding the widow experience is slowly growing, government efforts to address gender-based inequalities remain limited.

It is important to note that the cultural fabric of Cameroon is incredibly diverse, and that the widow experience can vary significantly across villages. Given the limitations and time frame of this research, it does not purport to map widowhood across the country in great detail, but simply offer a general overview informed by the 6 interviews conducted and primary and secondary sources which were available.

5.1. Marginalization and Mistreatment

A Cameroonian woman's identity is heavily informed by her marital status, clearly establishing her position in society as "the wife of...[her husband]." ¹³³ The loss of her husband is therefore detrimental to her own place in society, as she then loses this attachment to her husband's achievements within the community and lineage group after having been widowed.¹³⁴ This effectively leaves her far more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation than while married. Women are considered to be "'capital bearing objects' whose value accrues to the primary groups to which they belong through marriage or birth," and their treatment (or mistreatment) therefore remains a private matter following widowhood.¹³⁵ Because of this, these women are left particularly vulnerable to GBV and economic discrimination.

Protests organized by widows across Western Cameroon in July 2020 and June 2021 did temporarily raise regional awareness of the HTP against widows proliferating the country.¹³⁶ However, these calls for greater respect for human rights received little international attention, and local Cameroonian public figures responded with the claim that these practices—such as restricted

¹³² Arthur Bodi, *The Ordeal of Women in Cameroon*, January 12, 2024, https://rightforeducation.org/2024/01/12/the-ordeal-of-widows-in-cameroon/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-ordeal-of-widows-in-cameroon.

¹³³ Bodi, *The Ordeal of Women in Cameroon*.

¹³⁴ Pemunta and Alubafi, "The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women's Human Rights in Cameroon," 6.

¹³⁵ Pemunta and Alubafi, "The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women's Human Rights in Cameroon," 2; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta," June 17, 2025.

¹³⁶ Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa's Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis*; Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Cameroon Widows Accuse Women of Enforcing Harmful Traditional Rituals," Voice of America, June 23, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_cameroon-widows-accuse-women-enforcing-harmful-traditional-rituals/6207367.html.

personal hygiene, being forced to sleep next to the deceased, forced sexual relations with relatives, and forcible shaving—are necessary for the spiritual protection of the widows’ themselves.¹³⁷

In their 2014 concluding observations, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) expressed “deep concern” over “the stigmatization of widows and widowhood rites” and called for the immediate elimination of these dehumanizing practices.¹³⁸ This led Cameroon to respond with an outline of laws specifically protecting widows’ rights, which have yet to be implemented. Similarly, in 2018 Yaoundé accepted a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) recommendation from Iceland calling for the criminalization of discriminatory widowhood rites. The country has not yet done so however, arguing that its Penal Code can be interpreted to provide protection against harmful widowhood rites.¹³⁹

One of the greatest complaints of those advocating for more specialized treatment of gender-based inequalities is that women’s concerns are often still grouped with those of ‘youth,’ again really only addressing women in relation to their children and otherwise overlooking them.¹⁴⁰ The country’s Ministry for Women’s Empowerment and the Family—linking women’s and family matters in its very name—remains chronically underfunded and holds very little power within government. Arguably its greatest role thus far has been distributing clothes on International Women’s Day – a tradition which was boycotted by Anglophone separatist groups in 2017 and has not since resumed. The Ministry has established a handful of empowerment centers offering job training for women in large towns, but women have reported having to pay \$100 fees in order to attend courses, which is unsustainable for most.¹⁴¹

5.1.1. Harmful Traditional Practices and Gender-Based Violence

Widows in Cameroon must undergo a series of rites following their husbands’ death, both to demonstrate respect for their husband’s memory and to sever the spiritual bond between the two of them (particularly in the case of intended re-marriage). These rituals are overseen by a woman’s in-laws, and vary greatly from community to community, reflecting the many differences between the over 200 different ethnic groups in Cameroon.¹⁴²

In their analysis of the harmful WRP among the Balengou of Western Cameroon, Pemunta and Alubafi argue that WRP are just one of many harmful social practices used to symbolically maintain gendered social hierarchies, also including but not limited to female circumcision, food

¹³⁷ Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa’s Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis*.

¹³⁸ *Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of Cameroon**, CEDAW/C/CMR/CO/4-5 (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2014), 4, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/768412?ln=en&v=pdf>.

¹³⁹ Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa’s Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis*.

¹⁴⁰ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 12.

¹⁴¹ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

¹⁴² Bodi, *The Ordeal of Women in Cameroon*.

taboos, breast ironing, son preference, and female infanticide.¹⁴³ Drawing insight from feminist theories of “false consciousness” and “patriarchal bargain,” they examine the social internalization of behavior and attitudes—which they term “disavowal and projection.”¹⁴⁴ Through processes of alienation and exclusion, widowed women are pushed to the margins of society, increasingly willing to accept humiliation and abuse in return for feelings of belonging and inclusion.

Intended to ‘purify’ widows of the bad luck attached to them following their husband’s death, WRP are often performed to prove a woman’s innocence in her husband’s death.¹⁴⁵ The phrase “happy widow” used throughout Cameroon refers to a widow who played a role in her husband’s death, and is a grave condemnation of her character and ability to engage with her community.¹⁴⁶ One woman interviewed was forced to drink the water used to wash her husband’s corpse, as tradition prescribes that if the widow played a role in her husband’s death, she will die within one year of drinking the water.¹⁴⁷ Another was forced out of her matrimonial home with her one-year old daughter, barred from participating in the funerary ceremony, and forbidden from bathing or washing her hands for seven days.¹⁴⁸

WRP are also meant to serve as ‘boundary markers’ between a deceased man and his widow.¹⁴⁹ The sentiment among Pemunta and Alubafi’s ethnographic partners was unanimous that a woman is a man’s ‘keeper,’ and it is therefore necessary that following his death very specific rituals are performed to enable the man’s spirit to let go of his wife or wives. Numerous practices preventing a widows’ maintenance of her personal hygiene or physical appearance are intended to make her appear unattractive in the eyes of her husband, and to free her from the control and jealousy of her dead partner. Many Cameroonian elites and influential elders therefore still staunchly believe that such dehumanizing treatment is in the best interest of the widow.¹⁵⁰ The stigmatization so deeply rooted in some communities is not only a cultural matter but a family matter. Some families are trying to deviate from harmful WRP, but for other families it is inherent to their familial identity, and they “cannot let it go because it is like doing away with the ancestors.”¹⁵¹

Many widows are also confined to the home for an obligatory mourning period lasting between two and seven weeks, to prevent their “polluting the outside world.” When asked why this ritual confinement is necessary, both elderly women and men were of the opinion that “she [the widow]

¹⁴³ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 2.

¹⁴⁴ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 2.

¹⁴⁵ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 3.

¹⁴⁶ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 7.

¹⁴⁷ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 9; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 7.

¹⁴⁹ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 8.

¹⁵⁰ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 8.

¹⁵¹ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

is dangerous to whoever comes in contact with her at that time.”¹⁵² Others are forced into sexual relations with their late husband’s brother or other male relatives through levirate marriage, presented as their only option to avoid becoming homeless after being thrown out of the home and family with no provisions.¹⁵³ Some are threatened with death if they refuse.¹⁵⁴ Alubafi shares his own experience with the practice following his younger brother’s death in 2009, leaving behind his wife and son. Commonly practiced in order to ensure biological and social reproduction (particularly in cases of young widows who remain more fertile and capable of carrying children to term), the tradition is also maintained for fear of widows marrying into another family and taking with them family resources and investments.¹⁵⁵ Pemunta explains that from a perspective informed by the institution of marriage, a woman does not marry one man in Cameroon, but an entire family. She can therefore be inherited if her husband passes away.¹⁵⁶ The family of the widow may also advocate for levirate marriage as it maintains a certain degree of protection for her by the family-in-law which she would not otherwise have. Alubafi’s entire extended family therefore held a meeting following his brother’s death. While his sister-in-law’s family wanted her to marry either him or his surviving brother, both of them refused as they already had families of their own and it was not what the young widow wanted. As he describes, “the whole thing went on and on and on,” until the brothers were able to sponsor her education and eventual relocation to the United States.¹⁵⁷

Facing abandonment by their home community, stigmatization and disregard in politics, and segregation even from other women, widows are not given the chance to speak.¹⁵⁸ Considered responsible for their husbands’ deaths, they are relegated to endure whatever dehumanizing practices are forced upon them for the sake of tradition.¹⁵⁹ These practices draw widows into a vicious cycle, as generations of women have been raised and socialized into not only accepting but *reproducing* harmful WRP “in the name of maintaining tradition.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, “[o]lder widows reproduce WRP while new widows internalize and assimilate these practices into their habitus as a sign of identification with the former.”¹⁶¹ Women themselves become “...the victims, the perpetrators, and active enforcers of the practice,” as “elderly widows as ritual experts are the ones simultaneously charged with socializing younger widows and administering WRP on

¹⁵² Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 9; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁵³ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025.

¹⁵⁴ Kindzeka, “Cameroon Widows Accuse Women of Enforcing Harmful Traditional Rituals.”

¹⁵⁵ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 6; Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁵⁶ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁵⁷ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025.

¹⁵⁸ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025.

¹⁵⁹ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

¹⁶⁰ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 1; Kindzeka, “Cameroon Widows Accuse Women of Enforcing Harmful Traditional Rituals.”

¹⁶¹ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 2.

them.”¹⁶² Through the dehumanization and humiliation of the religious rituals and other practices ascribed to widows, they become even more likely to remain silent regarding other forms of oppression and discrimination against them.¹⁶³

5.1.2. Economic Discrimination

The International Crisis Group (ICG) describes economic inequality in Cameroon as deeply “entrenched” in the country’s customary law.¹⁶⁴ Women in general are barred from inheriting land or property, by which a woman’s experience of widowhood is made all the more difficult. Particularly in the case of the late husband having been the economic breadwinner of the family, she may encounter significant economic obstacles when faced with the sudden reality of becoming the sole caregiver to her family, in all senses of the term.¹⁶⁵

A. Disinheritance

As already discussed, disinheritance of one’s marital property and financial assets is one of the most widespread forms of discrimination against widows, with repercussions lasting long into the rest of both their own and their children’s lives. Cameroon is no exception to this phenomenon. Driven out of her marital home by her in-laws immediately following her husband’s death, Ma Mulam was forbidden from keeping anything of her husband’s.¹⁶⁶ Her story is one of resilience and success, but many become trapped below the poverty line, and find it near impossible to ever scale again.

While the family enjoys absolute ownership over their land according to national custom and law, women and widows are considered ‘non-family members’ by both their natal groups and the kinship group into which they marry, as under Cameroonian customary law they are defined as the property of their husband.¹⁶⁷ In Pemunta’s words, put simply, “[p]roperty cannot inherit property.”¹⁶⁸ Hajaratou Chanteh, a widow in the NWR interviewed by *The Guardian* in 2013, had been battling her family-in-law for 16 years following her husband’s death, after which the family took all of the money which she had earned or borrowed to care for her children, claiming that it was family property.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 2, 12.

¹⁶³ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 7.

¹⁶⁴ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁶⁶ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

¹⁶⁷ Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 4.

¹⁶⁸ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁶⁹ Bim Adewunmi, “Widows in Cameroon: ‘They Should Be Free to Live Their Lives,’” July 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/jul/01/widows-cameroon-free-lives-project>.

With a lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector, widowed women in Cameroon face significant traditional and administrative barriers to realizing economic recovery and independence following their disinheritance.¹⁷⁰ While the majority of Cameroonian land is farmed by women, they own very little of it.¹⁷¹ Women constitute 71.6% of all informal agricultural workers in Cameroon—agriculture being the primary source of livelihood for most rural communities. With secure access to land, a woman can feed her children, sell some of the harvest to pay for her children’s schooling and clothing, and purchase additional food to maintain nutrition and health.¹⁷² However, just 1.6% of women have a house with land attached with a deed in their name. The majority of these women supporting their families through farming therefore operate from land which they may nominally own but do not have legal claim to, leaving them vulnerable to eviction and exploitation by landlords and those with whom they have informal agreements.¹⁷³

B. Barriers to Court

From a legal perspective, one of the greatest barriers to better protection of widows is widespread inconsistency between statutory and customary Cameroonian law, and an absence of enforcement mechanisms. Like many African countries which were formerly colonized, Cameroon enjoys a dual legal system comprising both traditional customary law and received statutory law, from which many communities “pick and choose.”¹⁷⁴ If women are essentially ‘bought’ in marriage with their dowry, then their husbands and their families are the ones choosing which laws and norms are to be followed in their marriage ceremony. Upon widowhood, these women may have no idea which laws even apply to them and those which do not. The Cameroonian judicial system is further complicated by its bipartite legal system inherited from its former colonizers, by which the Anglophone-majority regions have retained the common law system left over from British imperialists, and the majority Francophone regions have kept the French civil law system.¹⁷⁵

As Wango explains, even in cases where widows are equipped and courageous enough to take their grievances to court, the majority of cases are simply dismissed because there is little institutional incentive for courts to pursue them.¹⁷⁶ Unless they have the resources to pay for a lawyer or an NGO to follow the case, widows have very little power to push their case any farther.

For most, significant traditional barriers keep them from ever making it to a court. Accusations of witchcraft following them and their children may dissuade them from drawing further social

¹⁷⁰ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

¹⁷¹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁷² *Women Left Behind: The Quest to Access Land*, directed by NRC - Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024, 10:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3vZ-AUD4bU>.

¹⁷³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

¹⁷⁴ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁷⁵ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis’”; Alan Kasujja, *How Are People Coping in Cameroon’s Anglophone Region?*, BBC Africa Daily, n.d., 19:37.

¹⁷⁶ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

condemnation, and abandonment by their in-laws may leave them with extremely limited resources and unable to afford transportation and legal fees.¹⁷⁷

Others may not have the option of taking their case to court, because their marriage was never legalized. When asked if she encountered difficulty in proving her status as a widow or in accessing her rights, Ma Mulam said that she had never tried, because her marriage ceremony was purely customary and never legalized in court. Without a marriage certificate, she does not know how to prove her status as a widow to the authorities.¹⁷⁸

Pemunta argues that there is a significant difference between those texts which are meant to comply with international law and what happens on the ground, contending that “[w]e have some of the best laws in Cameroon. But when it comes to implementation, forget it. It’s zero.”¹⁷⁹ The problem is not that the government has done nothing to address the situation of widows. There are ministries in charge of such programs, but with little organized implementation, follow-up, or education surrounding their existence, such efforts are largely useless.¹⁸⁰

5.1.3. Psychosocial Isolation

While widowhood is a universally traumatic experience for both men and women, the combination of gendered HTP and differences in access to resources and opportunity can make it especially challenging for widows. Alubafi describes widowhood as an experience that “leaves them [widows] in the middle of the ocean, without anything to hold onto.”¹⁸¹ He and Pemunta explain that “Whereas, a widow is held to be the primary suspect for her husband’s death and needs to absolve herself through WRP, the widower is readily offered an appropriate substitute to comfort him following the demise of his wife.”¹⁸² Ma Mulam shares the loneliness of being left to raise her children on her own, and no longer having anyone to share her burdens with. Isolated and judged by her in-laws at all times, she felt very “timid, afraid, and inferior” throughout her first few years as a widow.¹⁸³ Ma Wopsen expresses similar sentiments in the way that the loss of the partner she had in her husband and singlehandedly raising their children since has irrevocably changed her life.¹⁸⁴

As Wango explains, “[i]t is one thing to be going through trauma as a woman—to be facing GBV as a woman. It is *another* issue to be facing that kind of situation with widowhood added on to it.

¹⁷⁷ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Mulam Emilia Atangchua, “Interview with Ma Mulam Emilia Atangchua,” April 15, 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁸¹ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025.

¹⁸² Pemunta and Alubafi, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroon,” 6.

¹⁸³ Mulam Emilia Atangchua, “Interview Ma Mulam,” April 15, 2025.

¹⁸⁴ Wopsen Grace, “Interview with Ma Wopsen Grace,” April 15, 2025.

So the *weight*—the weight of widowhood. The weight of the loss—the grieving process—it is something that a lot of people do not understand unless they wear the shoes, unfortunately.”¹⁸⁵

Struggling alone with their children throughout the grieving period, widows are offered little to no psychosocial support.¹⁸⁶ In her experience as a psychotherapist working in the NWR, Wango feels that the psychological aspect of widowhood is hardly ever addressed. In certain cases, state programs may go so far as to help a widow reclaim stolen property or provide material aid in the form of some food or sanitary donations, but they do not address psychological trauma of either the widow or her children.¹⁸⁷ Wango argues that in such cases of the death of a spouse, there must be accessible therapy programs and intentional follow-ups on the psychological wellbeing of the widow and her children, which address the unique ways in which they are grieving not only the loss of their husband and father but also the changes in how their community treats them.¹⁸⁸ Otherwise, the social trauma of the severe discrimination faced by so many Cameroonian widows can follow them throughout the rest of their lives, reverberating across future generations.¹⁸⁹

5.2. Experience of Children of Widows

Francisca Moto – an officer in the promotion and protection of the family at the Women’s Empowerment Ministry – attributes the persistence of harmful widowhood rites in Cameroon to widespread illiteracy.¹⁹⁰ At only 35%, Cameroon has a lower rate of girls completing lower secondary school than the average for either its region (Sub-Saharan Africa) or income group (lower middle income) according to the World Bank’s 2023 data.¹⁹¹ A significant portion of these girls are children of widows themselves, as many women finding themselves having to take their children out of school following the loss of their spouse, as they can no longer afford school fees and need as many members of the household to be contributing sources of income as possible.¹⁹² Both Ma Wopsen and Ma Mulam have grappled with the reality of having to take some or all of their children out of school, due to being unable to afford exam fees.¹⁹³ An education cut short can leave them only partially literate, further limiting their chances of finding employment and more vulnerable to misinformation and exploitation.

Reflecting on their own childhood with a widowed mother, Interviewee A puts it simply: “We suffer the fates of our mothers. If your mother is seen as a witch [responsible for the death of your

¹⁸⁵ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁸⁶ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁸⁷ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁸⁸ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

¹⁸⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁹⁰ Kindzeka, “Cameroon Widows Accuse Women of Enforcing Harmful Traditional Rituals.”

¹⁹¹ World Bank Group, “Cameroon Gender Landscape,” Gender Data Portal, 2023, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/cameroon>.

¹⁹² Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

¹⁹³ Wopsen Grace, “Interview Ma Wopsen,” April 15, 2025; Mulam Emilia Atangchua, “Interview Ma Mulam,” April 15, 2025.

father], automatically you are seen as the daughter or son of a witch. As the child of a widow, you automatically face the poverty your mother faces or your father faces.”¹⁹⁴ In some rural areas, the children of widows are not only discriminated against by their community but also segregated in school for their bad luck.¹⁹⁵ When faced with this decision and with the resources to keep some but not all of their children in school, mothers may choose to leave their sons in school but take their daughters home, as male education is often prioritized over that of girls due to traditional gendered divisions and expectations of labor.¹⁹⁶ Daughters therefore can become particularly vulnerable to child labor and early marriage—also introducing the possibility of child widowhood—following the death of their father.¹⁹⁷

With few resources and little to no protection, both widows and their children are therefore left particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Forms of exploitation can vary regionally, based on social and security contexts. If they reside in a conflict zone, widows are particularly vulnerable to radicalization, as they no longer contribute to society in ways that are deemed worthy of reciprocation. Because they have become a source of shame to their community, it is less likely that anyone will object to their ill treatment or abduction by occupying armed groups. With fewer pathways to economic empowerment, widows and their children might also be more susceptible to the narratives used by such groups to recruit new members, promising financial and physical security. Entirely ignored in the CT and PVE literature, this is to be further explored in the following chapter.

¹⁹⁴ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

¹⁹⁵ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

¹⁹⁶ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

6. The Situation of Widows in the Anglophone Crisis

To quote Enloe once more, “[w]e will never usefully understand armed conflicts if we stubbornly focus our attention solely on the immediate war zone.”¹⁹⁸ There is a “patriarchal baseline” to Cameroonian society which is only further exacerbated by the ongoing Anglophone Conflict afflicting both the NWR and SWR, but in order to see its sweeping effects, we must look far beyond raw battlefield statistics.¹⁹⁹ Once we do this, the overwhelming presence of widows and their families among not only the victims but the participants in war becomes clear. Beginning with a summary of the origins of the Anglophone Conflict, this chapter then delves into the conflict’s particular effects on widows and their children, and how such challenges might eventually lead to radicalization.

6.1. Conflict Origins

Dating back to its colonial origins, the Anglophone Conflict is a contemporary manifestation of the cultural tensions created and stoked by Cameroon’s former colonizers, today most centered around Anglophone discontent concerning the country’s educational and judicial systems.²⁰⁰ With a population that is 20% Anglophone and 80% Francophone, many argue that the country has dealt with its “Anglophone Problem” since the current federalist system’s inception in 1961.²⁰¹ A colony originally created by Germany in 1884 and named “Kamerun”, the country had previously enjoyed a very limited European presence beyond coastal trading posts dealing with natural resources and those kidnapped into slavery. In 1919 British forces invaded and occupied German Kamerun as part of their WWI strategy, preceding the League of Nations’ establishment of the mandate system following the end of the war, by which the northern region of Kamerun was put under British rule and the southern region (constituting approximately 4/5 of the entire colony) under French rule. Both territories were placed under UN Trusteeship in 1946, but continued to be administered by the French and British imperial governments.²⁰²

A series of rebellions in the decades following culminated in a 1959 UN fact-finding mission recommending that French Cameroon become independent. The République du Cameroun was thus created on 6 January 1960, and on 6 May Ahmadou Ahidjo was elected President—a post he would hold for the next 20 years. In February 1961, Cameroonians in the still British-occupied territory voted on the possibility of joining either Nigeria or the Francophone Republic of

¹⁹⁸ Cynthia Enloe, “Foreward: Gender Analysis Isn’t Easy,” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), xv.

¹⁹⁹ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

²⁰⁰ Eyong Blaise Okie, “Cameroon Urged to Investigate Deaths amid Anglophone Protests,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/13/cameroon-urged-investigate-clashes-anglophone-regions>.

²⁰¹ “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028),” The Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon, March 19, 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/768/html/>.

²⁰² “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

Cameroon.²⁰³ Anglophone Cameroonians were not given the option of creating their own republic.²⁰⁴ Those residing in the North voted to join neighboring Nigeria, and Southern Cameroonians elected to join the Republic of Cameroon.²⁰⁵ On 1 October 1961, British Southern Cameroons therefore joined the République du Cameroun, becoming one federal republic consisting of 2 states and split into 10 semi-autonomous regions: eight Francophone and adhering to French civil law and education, and two Anglophone and retaining British common law and schooling.²⁰⁶ In practice however, power remained highly centralized and maintained by the Francophone majority.²⁰⁷

On 20 May 1972, a public referendum preceded the establishment of a new constitution, redirecting power to the President and renaming the country the United Republic of Cameroon. Records show that over 95% of the electorate voted for the 1972 Constitution, but Anglophone leaders recall this event as a “total reversal of promises made to British Southern Cameroon during constitutional talks.”²⁰⁸ In 1982, Ahidjo stepped down in his peaceful transfer of power to President Paul Biya, who remains the current President of Cameroon. In April 1984—after he reinstated the country’s name prior to its 1961 unification: the Republic of Cameroon—supporters of Ahidjo attempted a coup against Biya, deepening the regional divide and resulting in 70 deaths, 1,053 arrests, and 46 executions. In 1985, Fongum Gorji Dinka—head of the Cameroon Bar Association—called for an independent Ambazonia State for what was previously British Southern Cameroon.²⁰⁹ Dinka was arrested and tried for high treason, but ultimately acquitted of all charges. In 1990, the “Douala Ten” were arrested after attempting to form an opposition party. Until this point, the country had been ruled by one party: the Cameroon National Union. A year of opposition and pro-democracy protests followed, ending in a nationwide strike named “Operation Ghost Town” and organized by a coalition of opposition parties on 25 June 1991, involving a regional shutdown of transportation services, ports, shops and businesses.²¹⁰ The opposition called on President Biya to organize a national conference for political plurality, to which the government’s answer was to send military commanders in to forcibly break up activities.²¹¹

²⁰³ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²⁰⁴ “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

²⁰⁵ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²⁰⁶ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis’”; Okie, “Cameroon Urged to Investigate Deaths amid Anglophone Protests”; “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

²⁰⁷ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²⁰⁸ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²⁰⁹ Fongum Gorji-Dinka, “The New Social Order,” March 20, 1985, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ambazonia.org/media/pdfs/The%20New%20Social%20Order.pdf.

²¹⁰ This particular coalition was called the National Coordination Committee of Opposition Parties (NCCOP).

²¹¹ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

Following a tripartite conference between seven Francophone leaders and four Anglophone leaders in October of the same year, Biya agreed to call for national elections. The first national election following the establishment of multiparty politics came in 1992, in which Biya won against John Fru Ndi, a popular Anglophone politician. It is important to note that the international observing community did not consider this election either free or fair. A new constitution in 1996 thus proclaimed a “decentralized unitary state,” but power remained primarily with the President.²¹²

In October 2016, lawyers, students and teachers began peaceful demonstrations after French speaking judges and teachers were sent to practice in Anglophone-majority regions by the Francophone-majority government. This imposition of Francophone law and education was viewed by locals as a threat to Anglophone representation in the national legal system. Yaoundé responded with live ammunition and teargas, and this is widely considered to be the official beginning of the Anglophone Crisis timeline, as uninterrupted attacks have not ceased since.²¹³

6.2. The Ongoing Situation

In January 2017, negotiations between the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and the government failed after further reports of abuse on demonstrators by police forces. In response, the Consortium called for another Operation Ghost Town in the Anglophone region, to which State authorities responded by shutting down internet, banning the Consortium, and arresting its leaders.²¹⁴ A multitude of demonstrations and violent clashes with government security forces since have fueled serious calls for independence by armed separatist groups, which have since grown in number to combat security forces. One of the most notorious is the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF)—part of the larger Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC)—in addition to the Interim Government of Ambazonia (IG) and its military wing, the Ambazonia Self-Defense Council (ASC).²¹⁵

At the beginning of 2024, the NWR was considered the “second most dangerous administrative region for civilians in Africa, only surpassed by al-Jazirah state in central Sudan,” according to ACLED.²¹⁶ Anglophone majority regions remain in ad-hoc lockdowns enforced by local armed groups and state military forces, both contributing to daily armed clashes, kidnappings for ransom, arbitrary killings of journalists and humanitarian workers, and retaliatory attacks on civilians.²¹⁷

²¹² “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²¹³ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²¹⁴ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²¹⁵ Arrey Elvis Ntui, “Arrest of Separatist Leader Puts Spotlight on Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict,” *International Crisis Group*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/arrest-separatist-leader-puts-spotlight-camerouns-anglophone>; “Non-International Armed Conflicts in Cameroon | Rulac,” accessed February 25, 2025, <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflict-in-cameroon>.

²¹⁶ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon* (ACLED, 2024), <https://acleddata.com/2024/10/11/qa-the-evolution-of-ambazonian-separatist-groups-in-anglophone-cameroon/>.

²¹⁷ “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis’”; “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

Both Cameroonian and international action to address the crisis have been severely limited. Labeled Africa's most underfunded humanitarian crisis by the NRC, Cameroon's 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) received the lowest funding of all African countries, in the end only able to finance 43.1% of the original plan.²¹⁸ Their 2024 Plan saw a continuation of this trend, receiving only 45% funding, leaving a gap of \$202 million.²¹⁹ Simultaneously dealing with Boko Haram attacks in its Far North region and ethnic clashes over water and land along its shared border with Chad, Cameroon has systematically denied the gravity of the situation in its Anglophone regions.²²⁰ In 2019, Biya called for a "national dialogue" which quickly terminated because of "inadequate assurances to protect the integrity of the process."²²¹ Many Anglophone leaders were unable to participate due to imprisonment, and of the 39 principal recommendations to come out of the meeting, none addressed the differentiated concerns of women in a future transition out of conflict.²²² Biya ultimately granted the North West and South West regions "special status," for which regional assemblies were established for both regions but with not much more power than the existing regional councils. President Biya recently rejected a mediation offer from several former African heads of state, and a 2019 Arria-formula meeting on the humanitarian situation remains the only UNSC meeting held on the topic of Cameroon.²²³ Most humanitarian organizations have withdrawn their missions from the region since 2018 due to government suspensions and repeated attacks, leaving behind a widespread learned resentment of foreign aid workers in the Anglophone region.²²⁴ With rapidly rising fragmentation among separatist groups, sustainable and realistic peace processes become increasingly less likely.²²⁵

6.2.1. Impact on Daily Life

Labeled a "case study in global neglect" by the NRC, Anglophone Cameroon has become a humanitarian disaster of massive proportions.²²⁶ With over 1.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 334,000 Cameroonians internally displaced in the NWR and SWR, this is a crisis which the country is both unequipped and unwilling to address. At least 76,493 Cameroonians have been forced to flee to an equally unstable Nigeria, leaving behind their lives in Cameroon with very little promise of anything much better to follow.²²⁷

²¹⁸ Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa's Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis*; "Cameroon: The World's Most Neglected Displacement Crisis," *Norwegian Refugee Council*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2025/june/cameroon-the-worlds-most-neglected-displacement-crisis>.

²¹⁹ "Cameroon Tops Refugee NGO's List of Most Neglected Displacement Crises," *RFI*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250605-cameroon-tops-refugee-ngo-s-list-of-most-neglected-displacement-crises-nrc>.

²²⁰ "Cameroon," *International Crisis Group*, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon>.

²²¹ "Timeline: Cameroon & the 'Anglophone Crisis.'"

²²² *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 18.

²²³ "Cameroon: Populations at Risk."

²²⁴ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 6.

²²⁵ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon*.

²²⁶ "Cameroon Tops Refugee NGO's List of Most Neglected Displacement Crises."

²²⁷ "Cameroon: Populations at Risk."

Freedom House qualifies Cameroon as “Not Free” due to electoral corruption, a widespread lack of civil liberties, restrictions to freedom of assembly, and a disregard for due process protections.²²⁸ Initially strongly backed by civilians in the Anglophone regions participating in peaceful protests across major cities of both the NWR and SWR, enthusiasm for the separatist movement has dwindled over time as armed groups have become increasingly violent and indiscriminate in their attacks.²²⁹ With more than 6,500 deaths since 2016, Cameroon is considered to be at “imminent risk of atrocity crimes.” With serious violations of both international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) by all parties involved, many argue that the routine targeting of individuals on the basis of their cultural identity may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.²³⁰

With reports of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) dressing as military personnel to attack civilians and others of state security forces dressing as NSAG actors to extort and attack civilians, it has become increasingly difficult for human rights actors to so much as identify actors to attribute responsibility.²³¹ Security forces have carried out extrajudicial killings and widespread S/GBV, destroyed Anglophone villages, and committed those with suspected separatist ties to arbitrary detention and torture.²³² NSAGs have similarly killed and kidnapped while occupying extensive parts of the Anglophone regions, as well as banned government education through the destruction of schools across the region and abduction of students and teachers. Both military and separatist forces have targeted health facilities and humanitarian workers, forcing most international humanitarian organizations to cease operations in the region and further reducing civilian access to critical aid.²³³

From 2017 to 2019, targeting of civilians in the Anglophone region was primarily by state forces.²³⁴ The Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) recorded 206 villages either partially or entirely burned down—a well-known scare tactic used by the Cameroonian military as a form of collective punishment—between the beginning of the conflict and April 2019. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and BBC News Africa have released similar reports of soldiers shooting civilians from helicopters and spraying teargas at churchgoers as they left

²²⁸ *Cameroon*, Freedom in the World 2024 (Freedom House, 2025), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/cameroon/freedom-world/2025>.

²²⁹ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon*.

²³⁰ “Cameroon: Populations at Risk”; “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028)”; Ntui, “Arrest of Separatist Leader Puts Spotlight on Cameroon’s Anglophone Conflict.”

²³¹ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon*.

²³² Nick Ericsson, “‘Nowhere Is Safe’ - Cameroonians Trapped between Separatists and Soldiers,” *BBC Africa Eye*, May 26, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c6296pp1p6wo>; “Timeline: Cameroon & the ‘Anglophone Crisis.’”

²³³ “Cameroon: Populations at Risk.”

²³⁴ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon*.

Sunday Mass.²³⁵ But by 2020, separatists were doing the same in equal measure, and where NSAGs might have initially received more support from the regional and international human rights community, they have lost any moral superiority they might have once had as their own list of atrocities has mounted.²³⁶ Separatist-enforced boycotts of State institutions and lockdowns have closed schools, markets and businesses across the region, forcing more than 855,000 children out of school for more than eight years now and limiting access to resources and livelihoods. NSAGs routinely take students and teachers hostage if they disregard the education boycott, and in September 2019 a prison wardress was publicly beheaded and mutilated while visiting her home village.²³⁷

Having lost significant financial support since their beginning, NSAGs have found other sources of funding including but not limited to abductions for ransom, property looting, sales of illicit fuel, and arbitrary roadblocks and checkpoints requiring road traffickers to pay in order to pass. The greatest factor in rapidly diminishing support for NSAGs has been their increase in abductions for ransom, which grew in number particularly after 2020. Individual ransoms are not so high, for which NSAGs compensate by committing many abductions.²³⁸ Many separatist groups also demand a ‘liberation tax’ of the civilians residing in their occupied territories, where groups provide receipts upon payment of the tax and civilians are punished if they are caught by separatist forces without carrying this receipt. Such taxes are framed as a measure of support for the independence effort, meaning that civilians cannot refuse for fear of being labeled traitors and risking their physical as well as financial security. This becomes a catch-22 in areas where state security forces also maintain a strong presence, as if police or military encounter civilians and see that they *have* paid the tax, then they are also in trouble.²³⁹

As a rising number of NSAGs compete for control over land, the original separatist goal of a unified and independent Anglophone Cameroon becomes more distant and pathways to peace far less likely. A rise in community-based self-defense groups either against separatists, the state, or both, combined with a rise in ethnic militias has further complicated peace negotiations, making any real progress very difficult.²⁴⁰ More moderate Anglophone separatist leaders continue to call for a more peaceful rise in Anglophone autonomy, such as a return to something similar to Cameroon’s original federalist system, but this is becoming increasingly unrealistic.²⁴¹

²³⁵ “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

²³⁶ Ericsson, “‘Nowhere Is Safe’ - Cameroonians Trapped between Separatists and Soldiers”; “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

²³⁷ “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

²³⁸ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon.*

²³⁹ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon.*

²⁴⁰ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon.*

²⁴¹ “Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: A Submission of Evidence to the International Relations and Defence Committee – Written Evidence (ZAF0028).”

6.3. Effects of the Anglophone Conflict on the Experience of Widowhood

Postwar communities tend to have demonstrably higher percentages of female-headed households than pre-conflict.²⁴² These include homes led by war widows or women abandoned by their partners in wartime and caring for dependents alone, women living alone due to their children having been killed or taken away, and households without any resident adult guardian and instead led by an eldest daughter.²⁴³ The Anglophone Crisis has both increased the number of widows—who have lost their spouses to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, or death in crossfire—and intensified the general experience of widowhood described in Chapter 5.²⁴⁴ All of these transformed households are severely impacted by preexisting gender norms which already disadvantage women in non-conflict contexts, such as the inability to own land or property, to travel independently, to speak in public meetings, or to appear in mixed-gender settings.²⁴⁵ The additional loss (of friends, family, home, livelihoods, and belongings), economic hardship, and isolation of raising children alone in conflict only add to this.²⁴⁶

6.3.1. Heightened Physical Insecurity

With the instability of conflict and disintegration of existing security norms, all residents of the Anglophone region face the heightened risk of abduction and attack. NSAGs often target men and boys in particular in kidnapping for ransom due to greater perceived financial means than women and girls, leaving women at a far greater risk of being left alone to support their families than their male partners.²⁴⁷ In families where a man would have assumed responsibility for his late brother's wife and children, but he and all of his other brothers have been killed or kidnapped, there is no one left to protect the women and children left behind.²⁴⁸ Still grappling with their stigmatization and isolation even in the context of armed conflict, widows are therefore left even more vulnerable to the homelessness, food insecurity and violence which become a reality for so many survivors of war.²⁴⁹ Widows who were married either to soldiers, separatists, teachers, or civil servants often must flee their home regions following their spouse's death. Those who remain risk attacks on their homes and even murder by either NSAG or security forces based on their late husbands' position in the conflict.²⁵⁰

²⁴² Ruth Jacobson, "Women 'After' Wars," in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 225.

²⁴³ Jacobson, "Women 'After' Wars," 225.

²⁴⁴ Fredrick Onyambu, "Interview with Fredrick Onyambu," April 15, 2025; Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta," June 17, 2025.

²⁴⁵ Jacobson, "Women 'After' Wars," 225.

²⁴⁶ Giles, "Women Forced to Flee," 92.

²⁴⁷ "Cameroon: Populations at Risk."

²⁴⁸ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, "Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi," July 9, 2025.

²⁴⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta," June 17, 2025.

²⁵⁰ Mulam Emilia Atangchua, "Interview Ma Mulam," April 15, 2025.

Already having faced higher levels of sexual violence than the global average before 2017, Cameroon's rates of S/GBV have only increased since then. Ghost town operations, lockdowns and curfews have both increased the risk of domestic and sexual violence, and reduced access to medical care for those having experienced such violence.²⁵¹ Stigma surrounding sexual abuse combined with a shortage of humanitarian workers makes it difficult to measure the true prevalence of S/GBV in the Anglophone regions. The UN recorded 4,300 cases of S/GBV between February and December 2020 alone, of which half were cases of rape and 30% of child victims—figures which are significant even with incomplete data due to the stigmatization of reporting one's assault.²⁵² Combatants generally view local women in conflict zones as sources of enemy information or as spies, and both separatists and soldiers use rape as a weapon of war, as well as the coercion of women and girls into exploitative relationships which can leave them vulnerable to charges of espionage. The gravest incident reported thus far took place during a raid by Cameroonian soldiers in the town of Ebam, Manyu division in the SWR, where soldiers gathered 75 households and methodically raped over 20 women.²⁵³ The military has confirmed the raid but denied rape, which survivors believe was a "reprisal attack" to punish and diminish any support for separatists.²⁵⁴ Many medical staff have fled the region due to frequent attacks on hospitals and medical centers by both military and separatist groups, making it much harder for victims of such attacks to seek necessary medical attention.²⁵⁵ In her experience working as a psychotherapist in the region, Wango says that with the ongoing violence in the NWR and SWR, it has become extremely difficult to even enter some of the rural communities hardest hit by the conflict.²⁵⁶

Some women choose to enter into relationships with combatants as a source of social protection, but this calculation carries with it its own risks. Alubafi reports multiple cases of women—many of whom were widows—killed by military in his native Bamenda region, because they were dating separatist leaders.²⁵⁷ The vice versa is also true, where women are killed by NSAGs for being associated with military members. In both cases, these women are accused of being "blacklegs": those suspected of collaborating with and aiding the opposing party.²⁵⁸ Civilians who choose to flee an area after fighting begins also risk being labeled as such.²⁵⁹

Ma Mulam cites interrupted development as one of the greatest sources of insecurity in the NWR, where if the state attempts to begin any new development projects—such as the building of bridges or government institutions—NSAGs will intervene by kidnapping workers and demanding large

²⁵¹ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 21.

²⁵² *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 22.

²⁵³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 5, 22.

²⁵⁴ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 22; "Timeline: Cameroon & the 'Anglophone Crisis.'"

²⁵⁵ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 23.

²⁵⁶ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

²⁵⁷ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, "Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi," July 9, 2025.

²⁵⁸ *Anglophone Separatists*, 3, Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa (ACLED; Global Institution Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2024), 196.

²⁵⁹ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, "Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi," July 9, 2025.

ransoms from the state.²⁶⁰ Mass destruction of roads and infrastructure, coupled with administrative breakdown due to the conflict makes it near impossible for people to acquire the documents necessary for seeking any form of aid (be it medical, humanitarian, financial, or otherwise), and there is a rising fear of bringing legal cases to court for fear of being accused of sympathizing with the government if willing to utilize the state justice system.²⁶¹ This leaves widows subject to disinheritance and HTP with even fewer pathways towards empowerment and reparations.

While formally responsible for implementing the WPS agenda and other similar efforts towards more equitable women's rights both in and out of conflict, Cameroon's Ministry for Women's Empowerment and the Family has not been part of any of the bodies created by the government in response to the Anglophone Crisis.²⁶² Already having received limited representation, the percentage of women participating in civil leadership in Anglophone regions has further decreased as the conflict has worsened and any previously influential female representatives have fled.²⁶³

6.3.1. Conflict-Driven Displacement

Currently hosting 124,785 Nigerian refugees and with 453,662 IDPs and 600,000 returnees in the Far North alone, Cameroon is entirely unequipped to handle a migration crisis of this magnitude but unwilling to accept international intervention, having repeatedly rejected foreign requests to establish internal IDP camps because doing so would contradict the narrative that life in these regions is returning to normal.²⁶⁴ Many of the displaced are therefore left without housing, employment, civil papers, or schooling.²⁶⁵ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that more than 1.5 million Cameroonians in the Anglophone regions are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. At least 334,098 have been internally displaced due to the conflict, with more than 76,493 having fled to Nigeria.²⁶⁶

More than 60% of this displaced population are women and children—many of which no longer have a husband or father due to conflict-related death or disappearance.²⁶⁷ In a country already grappling with the shortcomings of its land distribution regime, all displaced Cameroonian families face the possibility of exploitative housing and employment agreements in their temporary homes. However, families led by widows are particularly vulnerable to this in such a context, as they have even fewer protections under both statutory and (more importantly in the context of most local communities) customary law. Of a 2024 survey conducted of women relocated to the Far North

²⁶⁰ Mulam Emilia Atangchua, "Interview Ma Mulam," April 15, 2025.

²⁶¹ Kasujja, *How Are People Coping in Cameroon's Anglophone Region?*

²⁶² *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 12.

²⁶³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 13, 20.

²⁶⁴ *Housing, Land and Property Rights for Displacement-Affected Women in the Far North Region of Cameroon*, Briefing Note (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024), 4; *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 5.

²⁶⁵ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 5.

²⁶⁶ "Cameroon: Populations at Risk."

²⁶⁷ "Canada Initiative Offers Opportunity for Cameroon Peace Process"; *Women Left Behind*.

region—where many IDPs of the Anglophone Crisis have fled—approximately half reported having little to no access to either housing or land. They instead were residing with host families or relatives, in temporary shelters for the displaced, or lodging offered by traditional leaders.²⁶⁸ However, conflict-induced displacement often facilitates the breakdown of many traditional mechanisms of support, limiting such options available.²⁶⁹ If widows have been disenfranchised by their in-laws, they may not have any extended family willing to support them. With no formal agreements, they have no protection against eviction, and many fall victim to multiple sales or renting of the same land parcel.²⁷⁰

In the case that families do manage to acquire land for themselves, they are only granted short-term access for the construction of temporary shelters, as their host villages do not have the space or resources to truly incorporate additional residents in the long term and have no formal mechanisms for the attribution of land to outsiders.²⁷¹ Some host villages offer fields which are rented out in sections to community members, but not everyone receives a plot, and the most fertile areas are reserved for permanent community members—not IDPs or refugees. If lucky enough to receive a plot, families led by women are granted the most remote and least arable land. To compensate, many routinely venture into the surrounding bush to fetch wood to sell, but this brings with it its own risks of attack and abduction by NSAGs.²⁷²

All of the displaced face significant difficulty in acquiring land because they are foreign to their host community. Displaced widows face this *and* the additional cultural stigma surrounding their widowhood, which follows them wherever they go. On paper, Cameroonian law grants women the same property rights as men. But in reality, land attribution is far more commonly handled in the context of social and customary norms and religious law, in which men generally control all economic transactions. Such discrimination is further exacerbated by the fact that many displaced women and children have lost their identification documents amid the conflict and are unable to replace them due to bureaucratic hurdles, making any formal land and housing agreements very difficult. Those who can, pay for forged documents or bribe their way through checkpoints, but many cannot.²⁷³ Reports of harassment at checkpoints have also become more frequent, with many accounts of having to negotiate sex in return for safe passage.²⁷⁴ Along the way, they must repeatedly renegotiate the terms of their stay and their personal safety with the men who control housing opportunities, transport, and access to the informal bush camps to which many have fled.

²⁶⁸ *Housing, Land and Property Rights for Displacement-Affected Women in the Far North Region of Cameroon; Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

²⁶⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

²⁷⁰ *Housing, Land and Property Rights for Displacement-Affected Women in the Far North Region of Cameroon*.

²⁷¹ *Housing, Land and Property Rights for Displacement-Affected Women in the Far North Region of Cameroon*.

²⁷² *Women Left Behind*.

²⁷³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 1,6.

²⁷⁴ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

If doing so alone, widowed women carrying children with them are at a far greater risk of financial and sexual exploitation.²⁷⁵

Those who flee are forced to leave behind their land, which often serves as their primary source of income.²⁷⁶ In the rare case that a woman is permitted to own or inherit land, it is generally only for the purpose of food grown for household consumption. With so few social protections, many single female heads of household forced to rent housing therefore report forcible eviction by land owners, who can easily disrespect the terms of any informal agreement made. This is particularly common if the woman is unaccompanied by a male relative.²⁷⁷ In a country where the majority of men and women support their families through farming and in which women make up 71.6% of all informal agricultural workers, this inability to access land is detrimental to families widowed by war.²⁷⁸

Upon returning home post-conflict after having been displaced, widows in particular may find that what was once their land has been taken away from them, either by extended family, neighbors, warring parties, or by the State.²⁷⁹ Just as they so often begin long before the first exchange of crossfire, these women's wars therefore also do not end so soon after the cessation of armed conflict, as their battle for the livelihoods of both themselves and their families is one that is waged far into the post-conflict future.

6.3.2. Further Economic Disenfranchisement

While limited access to land is perhaps the most obvious example of the significant traditional and administrative barriers encountered by widows in their search for economic independence, the lack of formal employment opportunities available to them is a close second.²⁸⁰ Existing economic difficulties are only intensified by the conflict, throughout which widows are among the hardest hit by a loss of social support due to displacement, death, and interruption to regular aid programs.²⁸¹

These women become the sole providers for their families in a context where economic opportunities are scarce to non-existent, leaving few options but to turn to poorly regulated illicit economies.²⁸² Ma Mulam describes how before the conflict erupted, she would sell produce on national celebration days to make ends meet, but can no longer do this because of lockdowns on such holidays. She sometimes goes to a nearby farm with those of her children old enough to help her work, but they are usually stopped by gunmen along the way and sent back home.²⁸³

²⁷⁵ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

²⁷⁶ *Women Left Behind*.

²⁷⁷ *Housing, Land and Property Rights for Displacement-Affected Women in the Far North Region of Cameroon*.

²⁷⁸ "Interview A," June 20, 2025; *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

²⁷⁹ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta," June 17, 2025.

²⁸⁰ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 11.

²⁸¹ "Interview A," June 20, 2025.

²⁸² Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, "Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta," June 17, 2025.

²⁸³ Mulam Emilia Atangchua, "Interview Ma Mulam," April 15, 2025.

For women who flee without their identity cards—without which it is impossible to legally find a job, open a bank account, create a formal business, leave the country, or marry—finding new livelihoods with which to support their families becomes incredibly difficult.²⁸⁴ Those who choose to remain in their home communities in the Anglophone region face the reality of paralyzed economies and infrastructure.²⁸⁵ The closure of most markets and microfinance institutions further limits their ability to support families and pay school fees for their children.²⁸⁶ Many are forced to find work in the illicit economy which has become critical to supporting families when there are not many sources of formal employment available.²⁸⁷ A pattern of rising sexual exploitation in the region is becoming clear, as major Francophone cities such as Douala and Yaoundé have received an influx of sex workers from the Anglophone regions in the eight years since the conflict's beginning. Health workers have reported prostitution as the only means of supporting families for many single women caught in the crossfires of conflict, contributing to rising cases of unwanted pregnancies and STIs in environments with little to no sexual and reproductive health infrastructure.²⁸⁸

6.4. Effects of Conflict on Children of Widows

It is impossible to discuss widowhood in the Anglophone Crisis without also discussing the hundreds of thousands of children who have been rendered fatherless—if not orphaned—by this conflict. No child is immune to the hardships faced by his or her parents, particularly in the context of war.

The displacement crisis arising out of the Anglophone Conflict is driving many other forms of abuse, among them a re-commodification of women and children and the rising saturation of regional child trafficking.²⁸⁹ While in transit and with less institutional protection due to the regional administrative collapse arising out of protracted conflict, children (particularly girls) are at a heightened risk of exploitation. This is especially the case for children of widows, who faced with the prospect of caring for multiple children and with few sources of security, may either sell their daughters into child marriages to far older men (perceived as their best chance at safety through protection from a husband) or into prostitution.²⁹⁰ Two suspected traffickers were arrested in Limbe in 2021 while traveling with 26 children from the conflict zone in the SWR intended to work as servants in Francophone Cameroon. Many more cases go unnoticed by the authorities due

²⁸⁴ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

²⁸⁵ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 1.

²⁸⁶ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 20.

²⁸⁷ *The Evolution of Ambazonian Separatist Groups in Anglophone Cameroon*.

²⁸⁸ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 21.

²⁸⁹ Raven-Roberts, “Women and the Political Economy of War,” 45.

²⁹⁰ Onofrio, *The Widows of Cameroon: Africa's Most Neglected Human Rights Crisis*.

to the confusion of war, and reports of child forced labor and sexual abuse in the Francophone regions and neighboring countries are becoming increasingly common.²⁹¹

At the beginning of the 2017 protests, the boycotting of schools in opposition of French language domination in the national school system received widespread support throughout the Anglophone region. But as militants destroyed schools and began to murder teachers who did not cease working, the movement rapidly lost its popularity. Within less than a year, at least 4,000 Anglophone schools had been shut down, depriving over 600,000 children of schooling for more than four years now. This particular separatist effort proved to be entirely counterproductive as it resulted in families instead sending their children to Francophone schools if able to. The boycott ultimately ended in September 2020 due to pressure from Anglophone civil society groups. However, over 70% of schools in the region remain only partially operational due to ongoing regional violence five years later.²⁹² Of those which are operational, many are turning away children unable to enroll due to lost birth certificates or attestations from former schools.²⁹³

6.5. How Can this Influence Vulnerability to Radicalization?

Some of the most critical push factors contributing to the chances of radicalization analyzed in PVE are “poverty, marginalization, discrimination, and a weakened social structure”; a perceived “lack of protection, disruptive social contexts, and experience of violence”; the “lack of a feeling of autonomy and identity”; real or perceived injustice; and a “lack of educational and employment opportunities.”²⁹⁴ While all of these can be connected directly to widowhood, no national or international PVE strategy has yet to do so, therefore promoting a massive blind spot in deradicalization efforts.

Women and girls might participate in armed conflicts willingly, because they consider it their only choice, or because they are forced to. Motivations involving protection, revenge, or political ideology might inform a woman’s choice to radicalize.²⁹⁵ Some join armed opposition groups because they feel alienated and marginalized by society, or might have lost family to the conflict and feel entirely alone.²⁹⁶ However, it is most common that they are recruited against their will. Many armed groups which lack popular support will abduct women and girls to keep themselves operational, employing them as cooks, porters, spies, recruiters, messengers, strategists,

²⁹¹ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 20.

²⁹² *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 7.

²⁹³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 19.

²⁹⁴ *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2017), 30, https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf.

²⁹⁵ Dyan Mazurana, “Women, Girls, and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups,” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 150.

²⁹⁶ Mazurana, “Women and NSAGs,” 161.

combatants, commanders, weapons dealers, and to collect water and firewood. It is very unlikely that once having joined (either willingly or unwillingly), a woman will be able to leave the opposition group while the conflict is ongoing.²⁹⁷ The choice to radicalize is therefore rarely considered anything but a last resort, informed by all other options available to her and their resulting consequences. In other words, “[i]t all depends on the woman, the situation they find themselves in, and the area.”²⁹⁸

6.5.1. Abduction Into Armed Conflict

One of the most vulnerable demographics in terms of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination, widows may find themselves in particularly challenging situations inside combat zones. Falling into multiple groups classified as high risk in such contexts—such as those who are homeless, internally displaced, or impoverished—widows and their households may be particularly susceptible to many different forms of exploitation, including radicalization.²⁹⁹

For many widows, radicalization is not a choice, as their extensive lack of social protection makes them prime targets for abduction by NSAGs. Pemunta has heard multiple accounts of armed groups in his village in Northern Cameroon taking widows and their daughters into custody. Members of the acting group can proceed to do whatever they wish with these women and girls, as nobody in the their community can or will object, given the traditional beliefs surrounding the limited societal worth of widows and their children.³⁰⁰ While held captive, most are subject to GBV and sexual assault, for which they will be further stigmatized upon their post-conflict release if they survive the war.

6.5.2. Joining Willingly

Whether driven by fear, anger, or grief, others may choose to radicalize willingly if it is the only source of empowerment visible to them. The extreme poverty and discrimination faced by so many widows only amplify feelings of threatened autonomy and identity in conflict, pushing them to urgently seek any possible sources of protection.³⁰¹ Wango feels that in this context, “radicalization is almost a given” for widows and their children.³⁰² Facing disenfranchisement on all fronts, they may join NSAGs as a survival strategy, particularly if they reside in or have fled to areas under separatist control.³⁰³ As Wango explains:

“The risks faced by widows, I would say, are far more than those faced by those who have their husbands around. The widow feels unprotected. The widow feels rejected. The widow

²⁹⁷ Mazurana, “Women and NSAGs,” 150.

²⁹⁸ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

²⁹⁹ Jack Onofrio, *Widowhood and Violent Extremism: An Intergenerational Cycle* (Global Fund for Widows, 2021), <https://www.globalfundforwidows.org/research/widowhood-and-extremism>.

³⁰⁰ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

³⁰¹ Onofrio, *Widowhood and Violent Extremism: An Intergenerational Cycle*.

³⁰² Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

³⁰³ *Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders*, 13.

feels exposed, and so generally they will be tilting towards where they feel they can find protection.

It goes without saying: widows are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. In our context, being married is something that protects you. So when that protection is not there, it's *easy* for anyone to want to exploit you. It's easy for anyone to want to put you in a more vulnerable situation because they feel like there is nobody there that can stand up to them. The person that protects you is no more. And yes, the radicalization actually, is *easier*, because the woman is looking for some sort of protection from somewhere. So if the structures that be cannot protect her and protect her children, she opts for another structure that can do this."³⁰⁴

Depending on the dominant force in their community, some women and/or their children may choose instead to militarize in order to receive certain institutional benefits. For example, a boy might enlist for the material compensations which soldiers and their families receive, such as housing, food rations, regular income, and health insurance. As Interviewee A says, "in the *worst* scenario, it can be the best option" for those facing few other choices.³⁰⁵

Another critical factor to take into account in the discussion surrounding widows and radicalization is that of mental health. Conflicts such as the Anglophone Crisis can greatly influence the way widows are seen and treated, and a perceived sense of injustice and resentment against a legal system which has failed them can further fuel a widow's decision to take up arms.³⁰⁶ Many of these women have lost their husbands during and to the war, which is a very specific form of loss, for which the mental health implications in such a context are often entirely overlooked.³⁰⁷ It is a different sort of grieving for a spouse lost in conflict abruptly and directly at the hands of a killer rather than gradually due to illness in peacetime. Neither means of loss is necessarily worse or more difficult than the other, but they require differentiated processes of support and acknowledgement, which Cameroon has thus far failed to provide.³⁰⁸ As Wango explains, "[e]specially if the widows lost their husbands in the course of this crisis, the women might be bitter against the structures that be, and out of that bitterness," be driven to association with either NSAGs or security forces.³⁰⁹

6.5.3. The Age Factor: Younger Widows and Children

As with any discussion surrounding PVE, these links are not causal, and widowhood in the context of an armed conflict does not promise radicalization. However, there are unique challenges

³⁰⁴ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

³⁰⁵ "Interview A," June 20, 2025.

³⁰⁶ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

³⁰⁷ "Interview A," June 20, 2025.

³⁰⁸ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

³⁰⁹ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, "Interview Wango," May 16, 2025.

attached to widowhood which can pave pathways to radicalization which might otherwise remain less visible to those with full and stable supportive households. What makes the issue of widowhood in the context of conflict so complex is the extent to which it intersects with many other demographics and risk factors. Age can ultimately also play a significant role in the risk of mobilization, both in regards to the age of the widow herself as well as that of her children.

There is some evidence that particularly young widows—especially if they are impoverished or displaced—are vulnerable to the financial incentives or emotional appeals offered by NSAG recruiters.³¹⁰ Wango argues that “[g]enerally, whatever age you are in a context, widowhood is almost synonymous to vulnerability.”³¹¹ However, she agrees that younger widows may be more susceptible to recruitment by NSAGs, where they might be treated slightly better due to what they can offer the group sexually. It is a risk, but in their eyes it is a calculated risk and offers a limit to what forms of S/GBV they will experience. Whereas if they remain alone in the midst of the conflict and unattached to either party, they remain equally vulnerable to attack from all sides.

Wango argues that this risk of radicalization is especially the case for children of widows, as “this radicalization sometimes becomes a means of the children trying to protect themselves and their mothers from those who are tormenting them because their father is no longer alive...it is very easy for the children to become radicalized...to either regain the property of their father [if their mothers have been forcibly disinherited], or to protect their mothers, or protect themselves, from what the law has failed to protect them from.”³¹² Especially in already insecure environments due to regional conflict, if widows do not receive any additional support from their natal family or from their late husband’s family, their children are more susceptible to radicalization than those still living in relatively stable homes. Of course, this is not a given, but it does present proven vulnerabilities.³¹³

One of the most understudied and unaddressed aspects of these children’s experience following the loss of their fathers is again the psychological impact of such a loss. Alubafi describes the “mental torture” that many children of the conflict experience when forced to bear witness to their fathers’ deaths, producing trauma that will stay with them for many years to come and influence all aspects of their life. He argues that this shared experience has created a generational shift in self-identity, by which many Anglophone children “no longer see themselves as part of the Cameroon that most of us [Alubafi’s generation] used to admire when we were growing up.”³¹⁴ If forced out of school due to ongoing closure in the Anglophone regions and a lack of family funds following their father’s death, children have far more time on their hands to engage with the narratives of local NSAGs, while simultaneously being exposed to fewer alternative

³¹⁰ Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, “Interview Dr. Vitalis Pemunta,” June 17, 2025.

³¹¹ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

³¹² Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

³¹³ “Interview A,” June 20, 2025.

³¹⁴ Mathias Fubah Alubafi, “Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi,” July 9, 2025.

counternarratives. With a weaker attachment to any long-standing national identity bonding them to their peers, these children might be more likely to join either the military or separatist groups to avenge their fathers and respond to the grief, trauma and anxiety associated with such a loss.

Widows and their children therefore are in an entirely unique class of vulnerability in the face of armed conflict, and must be addressed as such. The many ways in which society places them at a disadvantage can push them to the extreme, with very few protective mechanisms against their exploitation.³¹⁵ In areas facing the instability of armed conflict, both the prevalence and challenges of widowhood are all the more evident. While certainly not a guaranteed or linear process, the links between widowhood, exacerbated insecurity, and radicalization constitute a possible pathway to radicalization that remains entirely overlooked by mainstream PVE, CT and peacebuilding literature.

³¹⁵ Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

Conclusions and Recommendations

“Each and every one of us is surrounded by a widow and a widower in one way or another.”

- Dianah Kamande, Founder and Executive Director of *Come Together Widows and Orphans Organization (CTWOO)*

Every time someone enters into a marriage agreement, they accept the possibility of widowhood.³¹⁶ As Kamande says, it is an experience to which all are eventually exposed in one way or another, either directly or indirectly.³¹⁷ A demographic transcending all cultures, classes, and ages, widows have the potential to become powerful advocates for reconciliation and peace, but for this they must first be given the resources with which to do so. Otherwise, they simply remain one more disadvantaged group vulnerable to both experiencing and committing harm.

Through an analysis of the particular case of Cameroon’s NWR and SWR amidst the Anglophone Crisis, this thesis explored the unique ways in which widows and their households can become vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and in the worst case radicalization in conflict zones, if left unaided in the face of widow stigmatization and destitution. Facing disinheritance and discrimination around the world, widows are triply disadvantaged in armed conflict according to their gender, their civil status, and their position in the conflict. In the case of the Anglophone Crisis, Anglophone widows face discrimination on the basis of their English-speaking origins as well as their marital and economic status. With few pathways towards physical and financial security, they are even more vulnerable to the recruitment narratives of NSAGs and local state security forces alike. Their children are all the more so, growing up amidst the stigmatization of themselves and their mothers, in addition to regional conflict.

As demonstrated in the case of Cameroon, policies intended to protect widows do exist, but they are not enforced. The implementation of existing policy is therefore first and foremost to what must be done for the improvement of widows’ rights. Greater academic and policy-oriented attention must also be paid to the different forms of empowerment available to widows and their children, including more universal legal recognition of marriage in countries practicing customary marriage, reform of land distribution systems, and a diversification of disaggregated gender data.

The 2022 UNGA Resolution addressing the situation of widowhood outlined four key first steps in improving international protection for widows: a recognition and registration of all marriages, explicit inclusion of widows in SDG National Action Plans (NAPs), the recognition and condemnation of harmful widowhood practices by all member parties, and the disaggregation of

³¹⁶ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

³¹⁷ Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

data collection.³¹⁸ Perhaps the most critical recommendation: a more regulated and enforced marriage registration process ensures legal recognition of the right to inherit, access to social programs, and protective mechanisms against harmful practices in the event of widowhood. However, the Resolution's definition of marriage was also the most contentious aspect of the agreement's negotiation. The final text urges party states to "establish domestic processes for registering and recognizing all marriages, *in accordance with domestic legislation and justice systems*. [emphasis added]"³¹⁹ As previously discussed, in many countries where abuse against widows is a known problem, customary or cultural marriages are not recognized by the state, meaning that those women are unable to access their rights following the loss of their partner. To truly address the disinheritance problem, states must therefore first revisit and possibly diversify their existing definition of marriage.

All efforts towards the economic empowerment of widows are essential to the fortification of their families against potential radicalization. The desire to protect their children above all else from their own hardship is a unanimous sentiment shared by every widow interviewed for this project. Without any offers of dignified work available to them, they are unable to do so, leaving their children far more vulnerable to the pull of NSAG narratives and the financial security of a military posting. Community strengthening efforts must therefore prioritize the education of their widows, as well as vocational training. With the basic legal knowledge acquired through even a brief course lasting one or two weeks, widows gain both an awareness of and trust in their inherent rights and status, not only as women but as human beings. This in itself is a significant source of empowerment, as it improves their own self-image, as well as the treatment they are willing to accept from others. Simply ensuring their ability to read is a critical step towards widows' empowerment, as it ensures their ability to fully understand the processes and agreements which family and community-members may try to coerce them into. Vocational training in occupations ranging from soapmaking to teaching likewise offer widows the skills with which to pursue alternative sources of income before conceding to exploitative agreements or falling victim to radicalization. All three of these essential forms of education equip widows with tools with which to advocate for themselves and their families, better securing them against harmful practices, disinheritance and land-grabbing. Without them, widows have very little power to help themselves, their children, or their communities.

Data is critical to the reform and implementation of more effective widow protection mechanisms, but it is missing.³²⁰ With very little research on the topic of widows to begin with, existing work remains largely anecdotal and focuses almost exclusively on the physical needs of widows, entirely

³¹⁸ Kremin, "Addressing the Situation of Widows: What It Means & What's next."

³¹⁹ Addressing the Situation of Widows.

³²⁰ Dianah Kamande, "Interview with Dianah Kamande," May 23, 2025.

overlooking the importance of their mental wellbeing.³²¹ The public often thinks that once immediate material needs such as food and housing are addressed, their work is done. But in order to effectively empower and reintegrate widows into their communities, we must normalize asking the question: How was this woman widowed? All widows require psychosocial support, but the type of support and extent necessary varies based on situation, community, region, and country. If a woman witnessed her husband's murder in a conflict setting and then suffered abuse and rape in front of her children and at the hands of armed forces, she and her children require a very different kind of support than those who lost their husband and father to illness in a stable community.³²² If she was married in a polygamous community and she was not the only woman left widowed by her husband's death, she faces different obstacles and options than a widow of a monogamous marriage. Response programs are not a one-size fits all, they must be tailored to the particular situations faced by widows.

Programs intended to strengthen and restore communities during and after conflict must therefore offer targeted initiatives based on *how* a woman was widowed. The extent to which psychosocial support is required depends on the widow's pre-existing situation and on the way in which she was widowed. For example, abruptly losing a spouse to combat does not require the same type of support as a loss to illness in peacetime. Many disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs—defined by the UN as processes which contribute to “security and stability in a post-conflict recovery context by removing weapons from the hands of combatants, taking the combatants out of military structures and helping them to integrate socially and economically into society by finding civilian livelihoods”—focus almost exclusively on male ex-combatants, ignoring women and girls entirely in their transition back into civilian life.³²³ This oversight in reintegration programs is particularly obvious in programs across the African continent.³²⁴ Many women consciously choose not to identify themselves as former fighters or associates of armed groups so as to avoid further stigmatization in their reintegration.³²⁵ In the case of widowed women and their children who became involved with armed groups, this calculation is two-fold, further informed by the cultural stigma surrounding widowhood.

Marriage prospects can also be affected by a woman's ex-combatant status, as she may encounter difficulty re-adjusting to and once again meeting the standards of traditional gender norms. For example, the bodies of women and girls captured by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone were carved with the letters “RUF” to signal their ownership by the rebel group. Upon their release following the war's end, these women faced significant stigmatization and

³²¹ Written Statement* Submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status, A/HRC/39/NGO/X, 39th (2018).; Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango, “Interview Wango,” May 16, 2025.

³²² Dianah Kamande, “Interview with Dianah Kamande,” May 23, 2025.

³²³ Dyan Mazurana and Linda Eckerbom Cole, “Women, Girls, and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR),” in *Women and Wars*, ed. Cohn, Carol (Polity Press, 2013), 195.

³²⁴ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, “Women, Girls, and DDR,” 205.

³²⁵ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, “Women, Girls, and DDR,” 197.

ostracization in civil life as the brand was interpreted as a sign of past sexual abuse and spoiling.³²⁶ Severely dehumanizing practices such as this, coupled with a widow's greater likelihood of experiencing sexual violence due to her isolation and her difficulty in re-marrying outside of her late husband's family, can make this reality all the more harmful to a widow's chances of re-establishing a post-conflict life for herself and her family.

In an effort to create greater program visibility and accessibility for such women, *Integrated DDR Standards* (IDDRS) call for expanded eligibility criteria ensuring that all female ex-combatants are also eligible for DDR programs.³²⁷ This can involve revision of what we classify as a "combatant," as there currently is no common definition of "female combatant" or even a "female associated with fighting forces."³²⁸ Informed by more extensive analyses of the distinct challenges faced by women in these environments, a revision of programs which may require long visits (sometimes lasting years) is also recommended, as protracted stays may be difficult or even impossible for many single women due to transportation or childcare issues.³²⁹ Many DDR programs are essentially "cantonments" simultaneously containing and disarming armed forces, and very rarely do they tailor any aspects of their programs and facilities to gendered needs (such as SRHR and childcare).³³⁰ If a young widow has no surviving male relative to accompany her, she is left with little protection within the camp, and even less help in raising her children while participating in the program. An older widow, meanwhile, may have lost her sons to the conflict and have no reliable means of transport to and from the program site. Demobilization sites may also be poorly equipped for reproductive and sexual health care, and do little to prevent S/GBV by fellow ex-combatants.³³¹ Again, without husbands in these contexts in societies where women are expected to receive protection from male guardians, widows are even more vulnerable to such harassment.

To truly improve their situation, widows require a seat at the table. One of the most consistently neglected gender and human rights issues, widowhood is rarely if ever mentioned in international development and peace talks. As the frequency of armed conflict increases worldwide, so too does that of widowhood.³³² Subject to the dictates of patriarchal custom and harmful mourning rites shrouded in local tradition, these women and their families live as outcasts and with few economic or educational opportunities. In other words, widowhood becomes a social death of its own, to

³²⁶ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, "Women, Girls, and DDR," 210.

³²⁷ Nicole George, "The Price of Peace? Frictional Encounters on Gender, Security and the 'Economic Peace Paradigm,'" in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security*, 1st ed., ed. Soumita Basu et al. (Bristol University Press, 2020), 202, <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781529207774.004>.

³²⁸ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, "Women, Girls, and DDR," 205.

³²⁹ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, "Women, Girls, and DDR," 206.

³³⁰ Jacobson, "Women 'After' Wars," 225.

³³¹ Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole, "Women, Girls, and DDR," 206.

³³² Jennifer Post, "The Costs of Global Conflict Are Increasing, Verisk Reports," Risk Management, January 2, 2025, <https://www.rmmagazine.com/articles/article/2025/01/02/costs-of-global-conflict-increasing>.

which widows are relegated to navigate their grief and confusion alone.³³³ Stripped of their dignity and lacking the decision-making power of their married and male peers, widows are even more limited in their options during war. The effects of the disastrous combination of low education and high poverty rates afflicting most conflict zones are all the more obvious in the global situation of widows, and as the international widow population grows, will directly contribute to further social deterioration.³³⁴ One of the most often used phrases in international development circles is that describing the mission to “leave no one behind.”³³⁵ What would these women say to a seasoned human rights professional touting this mantra, who has never before heard or spoken the word ‘widow’ on UN grounds? How can you tell someone that they are leaving you behind, when you are entirely invisible to them? Celebrating an International Widows’ Day once a year is not enough to raise awareness of this topic, particularly for those women who have been widowed in conflict and left to navigate the conflict and their grief entirely on their own. Purporting to advocate for universal human rights and gender-based equity while continuing to ignore this international crisis does widows and their children a massive disservice, condemning them to the very patterns of destitution and violence which the international human rights community has dedicated itself to reducing. Until widows and their children are given a voice on the international stage, one in three VE recruits will continue to come from widowed households with no other pathways of empowerment, and any and all efforts to truly address the growing problem of global violence and extremism will fall short.³³⁶

³³³ Written Statement* Submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status, 2.

³³⁴ Written Statement* Submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status, 4.

³³⁵ Written Statement* Submitted by Graduate Women International (GWI), a Non-Governmental Organization in Special Consultative Status, 3.

³³⁶ United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (United Nations, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789210025812>.

Appendix

Interview Questionnaires

A. Interviews with Veronica Ngechu and Rose Muthoni

1. Would you feel comfortable sharing a little about yourselves and your families?
2. How have your lives changed since your widowhood?
3. **How have people in your community responded to your situation?**
4. Have you felt supported, or have there been times when you felt isolated or judged?
5. **What kinds of support have been most meaningful to you, and were there times when you felt isolated or judged?**
6. Can you describe how you've been supporting yourself and your family?
7. Were there challenges in accessing land, housing, or resources after your husband was gone?
8. Have you been able to keep or claim your husband's property?
9. **Have you tried to access any legal support or government assistance? What was that experience like?**
10. Were there any difficulties in proving your status as a widow or accessing your rights?
11. Are there traditional practices in your community that affected your situation as a widow?
12. Have you faced pressure to remarry, give up property, or move from your home?
13. Have you ever felt unsafe or threatened since your husband's disappearance/death?
14. **Were there times you felt vulnerable because of your status as a widow?**
15. How has your children's life or schooling been affected?
16. What helps you stay strong or hopeful?
17. **Are there people, organizations, or spiritual practices that have helped you along the way?**
18. **If you could speak to leaders or decision-makers, what would you want them to understand about your experience?**
19. **What do you feel are the best ways to empower widows after they lose their spouse?**
20. **Is there anything else you'd like to share that hasn't come up yet?**

B. Interview with Fredrick Onyambu

1. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
2. How can regional conflict shape the obstacles and risks faced by widows?
3. In your experience working in this field for some time, what do you feel are some of the best and worst programs or structural attempts at improving resources and stability for widowed women?
4. In your personal and professional experience, how well do government efforts address the security, economic, and psychological needs of widows?
5. What policy measures would you recommend to reduce widows' vulnerability to violence?
6. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?
7. How can community-based approaches be strengthened to provide better protection and opportunities for widows and their families?
8. How do cultural, legal, and economic structures impact widows' vulnerability to violence and radicalization?

C. Interview with Dianah Kamande

1. In your words, how would you describe yourself and what you do in the context of women's rights?
2. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
3. How can regional conflict shape the obstacles and risks faced by widows?
4. In your experience working in this field for some time, what do you feel are some of the best and worst programs or structural attempts at improving resources and stability for widowed women?
5. In your personal and professional experience, how well do government efforts address the security, economic, and psychological needs of widows?
6. What policy measures would you recommend to reduce widows' vulnerability to violence?
7. One obstacle in advocating for better policies supporting widows and their rights is that many governments don't understand why they must distinguish between women and widows in their policy for it to be effective. Can you speak to this at all?
8. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?
9. How can community-based approaches be strengthened to provide better protection and opportunities for widows and their families?
10. How do cultural, legal, and economic structures impact widows' vulnerability to violence and radicalization?
11. Is there anything else you would like to speak about or add?

D. Interview with Dr. Tengen Yvette Bennaka Wango

1. In your words, how would you describe yourself and what you do in the context of women's rights?
2. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
3. In your experience working in this field for some time, what do you feel are some of the best and worst programs or structural attempts at improving resources and stability for widowed women?
4. In your personal and professional experience, how well do government efforts address the security, economic, and psychological needs of widows?
5. What policy measures would you recommend to reduce widows' vulnerability to violence?
6. One obstacle in advocating for better policies supporting widows and their rights is that many governments don't understand why they must distinguish between women and widows in their policy for it to be effective. Can you speak to this at all?
7. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?
8. How can community-based approaches be strengthened to provide better protection and opportunities for widows and their families?
9. How do cultural, legal, and economic structures impact widows' vulnerability to violence and radicalization?

Conflict & Widowhood

1. How can regional conflict shape the obstacles and risks faced by widows?
2. How can regional conflict affect the ways in which widows are received by their communities?
3. In what ways might widows be treated differently by armed forces than their other community members?
4. Are widows particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, or radicalization? If so, how?
5. Do you see any differences in the coping strategies used by widows compared to other conflict-affected women?
6. How are children of widows affected - psychologically, socially, and economically – by both the conflict and the loss of a parent?
7. Is widowhood perceived differently across age groups or ethnic communities within Anglophone Cameroon?
8. Do you observe any correlation between widowhood and susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups or participation in radicalized movements?
 - a. What factors increase or decrease this vulnerability?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic that I have missed?

E. Interview with Dr. Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta

Widowhood in Cameroon

1. Can you briefly describe the work you have done on the topic of widowhood?
2. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
3. Is widowhood perceived differently across age groups or ethnic communities within Anglophone Cameroon?
4. One obstacle in advocating for better policies supporting widows and their rights is that many governments don't understand why they must distinguish between women and widows in their policy for it to be effective. Can you speak to this at all?
5. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?

Widowhood in the Anglophone Crisis

1. In what ways has the Anglophone Crisis worsened the challenges faced by widows and their families?
2. How do cultural, legal, and economic structures impact widows' vulnerability to violence during armed conflict?
3. How are children of widows affected - psychologically, socially, and economically – by both the conflict and the loss of a parent?
4. Do you see any differences in the coping strategies used by widows compared to other conflict-affected women?
5. Do you observe any correlation between widowhood and susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups or participation in radicalized movements?
 - a. What factors increase or decrease this vulnerability?

Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic that I have missed?

F. Interview with Interviewee A

Widowhood in Cameroon

1. Can you briefly describe the work you currently do, and have done on the topic of widowhood and/or women's rights in the past?
2. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
3. Is widowhood perceived differently across age groups or ethnic communities within Anglophone Cameroon?
4. One obstacle in advocating for better policies supporting widows and their rights is that many governments don't understand why they must distinguish between women and widows in their policy for it to be effective. Can you speak to this at all?
5. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?

Widowhood in the Anglophone Crisis

1. In what ways has the Anglophone Crisis worsened the challenges faced by widows and their families?
2. How do cultural, legal, and economic structures impact widows' vulnerability to violence during armed conflict?
3. How are children of widows affected - psychologically, socially, and economically – by both the conflict and the loss of a parent?
4. Do you see any differences in the coping strategies used by widows compared to other conflict-affected women?
5. Do you observe any correlation between widowhood and susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups or participation in radicalized movements?
 - a. What factors increase or decrease this vulnerability?

Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic that I have missed?

G. Interview with Dr. Mathias Fubah Alubafi

Widowhood in Cameroon

1. Can you briefly describe the work you have done on the topic of widowhood?
2. What are some of the most critical challenges faced by women and their children following widowhood?
3. Is widowhood perceived differently across age groups or ethnic communities within Anglophone Cameroon?
4. One obstacle in advocating for better policies supporting widows and their rights is that many governments don't understand why they must distinguish between women and widows in their policy for it to be effective. Can you speak to this at all?
5. What gaps exist in current research on this topic?

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5. Do you observe any correlation between widowhood and susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups or participation in radicalized movements?
 - a. What factors increase or decrease this vulnerability?

Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic that I have missed?

H. Interviews with Ma Mulam Emilia Atangchua and Ma Wopsen Grace

1. Would you feel comfortable sharing a little about yourselves and your families?
2. How have your lives changed since your widowhood?
3. How have people in your community responded to your situation?
4. What kinds of support have been most meaningful to you, and were there times when you felt isolated or judged?
5. Can you describe how you've been supporting yourself and your family?
6. Were there challenges in accessing land, housing, or resources after your husband was gone?
7. Have you been able to keep or claim your husband's property?
8. Have you tried to access any legal support or government assistance? What was that experience like?
9. Were there any difficulties in proving your status as a widow or accessing your rights?
10. Are there traditional practices in your community that affected your situation as a widow?
11. Have you faced pressure to remarry, give up property, or move from your home?
12. Were there times you felt vulnerable because of your status as a widow?
13. How has your children's life or schooling been affected?
14. Are there people, organizations, or spiritual practices that have helped you along the way?
15. How do you feel Cameroon's ongoing conflict has affected your experience of widowhood?
- 16.** What are the main sources of insecurity in your area?
- 17.** How do armed groups, security forces and other actors interact with widows and their families?
18. If you could speak to leaders or decision-makers, what would you want them to understand about your experience?
19. One barrier to proper institutional support for widows is that policymakers often do not seem to understand the difference in the needs of widows versus women in general. What are some of the most important distinctions that they must remember?
20. What do you feel are the best ways to empower widows after they lose their spouse?
21. Is there anything else you'd like to share that hasn't come up yet?

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