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“I Live in Constant Peril”

Discrimination, Lack of Economic Autonomy,
and Violence Against Women in Cameroon



“I Live in Constant Peril”

**Discrimination, Lack of Economic Autonomy and
Violence Against Women in Cameroon**

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Summary

For more than a decade, Cameroon's government had publicly committed to halving violence against women by 2026, an ambitious and necessary goal in a country where women face widespread violence including physical, economic, psychological and emotional violence, both within the home and in public life, most often perpetrated by husbands, intimate partners, and male relatives. These abuses are not isolated incidents but are rooted in entrenched gender inequality, discriminatory laws, weak institutions, and exacerbated by chronic underinvestment in prevention and survivor support. Despite repeated commitments since 2011, the government has taken few concrete steps toward meeting its stated target. Midway through 2026, the government has blatantly failed to meet its commitments, leaving women exposed to harm and survivors without meaningful protection or access to justice.

The violence women in Cameroon face is structural, with a systemic impact closely linked to women's limited control over land, housing, income, and other economic resources. The legal framework governing family relations reinforces male dominance by designating husbands as heads of household and primary managers of matrimonial property. These provisions weaken women's decision-making power over residence, employment, and immovable property during marriage and after its dissolution. Although a draft Family Code that could address some of these inequalities has existed for more than 20 years, the government—which has been governed by the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, under Paul Biya, as President, for the entire duration—has failed to adopt it. This prolonged inaction reflects a broader lack of political will to challenge discriminatory norms and reform laws that enable men's violence and economic control over women within the Cameroonian society.

At the same time, Cameroon lacks a comprehensive policy or national guidelines on domestic violence. The absence of a coordinated, well-resourced response has left police, judicial officials, health providers, and social workers ill-equipped to prevent abuse, protect survivors, or hold perpetrators accountable. Women who attempt to seek help often encounter dismissive attitudes, pressure to reconcile with abusers, or outright obstruction. Harmful social norms that normalize male authority and justify violence

further entrench these institutional failures, creating an environment in which perpetrators act with near impunity.

This report documents the many ways in which structural discrimination is weaponized to commit violence against women, including acts of economic violence—controlling or coercive acts, or behavior or practices that cause economic harm or deprivation—through research conducted between September and December 2024, in Maroua in the Far North region, Douala in the Littoral region, and Buea in the South West region. These locations were selected to reflect Cameroon’s demographic, religious, and legal diversity, as well as the harms produced by under-resourced public services, and ongoing insecurity in parts of the country. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 60 women who experienced physical, psychological, and economic violence, as well as discussions with government officials responsible for social service delivery and religious leaders. The testimonies reveal consistent patterns of abuse and systemic barriers that give rise to violations of women’s rights to bodily integrity, health, equality and nondiscrimination, property, and an adequate standard of living.

All the women Human Rights Watch interviewed described experiencing multiple and overlapping forms of violence—physical, psychological, emotional, and economic. Many recounted how abusive husbands were able to dispose of jointly acquired land and housing without their consent by selling property, transferring titles, or fraudulently registering assets in the names of children or relatives. Several women described how their husbands shut down their businesses, sold work equipment, or cancelled leases, cutting off their only source of income. In these cases, men leveraged economic inequality and discrimination to trap women in abusive relationships and punish those who attempted to leave.

Some women reported being prevented from working outside the home and gaining any financial independence. One woman described spending nearly three decades confined to her home because her husband forbade her from going outside or speaking to others and beat her when she disobeyed. This enforced economic dependence left her unable to escape abuse or support her children independently. Such experiences were not isolated but reflect a broader pattern in which men use violence and threats to control women’s labor, mobility, and earnings.

Discrimination against women is tied into the family. Daughters routinely face unequal treatment in inheritance, despite the Civil Code's formal recognition of equal inheritance rights for all children. Traditional authorities often exclude daughters from lists of heirs submitted to courts, and land title succession documents frequently fail to recognize women's claims. Widows are particularly vulnerable to dispossession. Many widows reported being evicted from their homes after their husbands' deaths or denied access to property that was legally part of the matrimonial estate. Confusion or disregard among judicial and administrative officials regarding community property in marriages and matrimonial property regimes often results in sons or male relatives being granted control over entire estates while widows are sidelined. In one case, a widow was pressured to marry one of her deceased husband's brothers to retain access to land and housing, for her and her children. She refused and had to leave her property and take her children to live with her parents.

Women in long-term domestic partnerships or consensual relationships face additional risks, since these relationships are not recognized if not formally registered in a civil status registry. After the end of such unions, many women receive no child support and have no effective legal remedy to claim property or financial assistance from their former partner. Poorly resourced social services and complex legal procedures further limit access to justice for these women and their children.

The failure of state institutions compounds these harms. Many women told researchers that when they attempted to report violence to the police or seek redress through the courts, they were advised to stop pursuing their complaints or blamed for their abuse. Some faced retaliation from their husbands after contacting authorities, while others feared reporting violence because their abusers had close ties to police or local officials. The lack of public information on domestic violence and available services leaves many women unaware of their rights or where to seek help, reinforcing silence and impunity.

Cameroon has reached its self-imposed 2026 deadline to halve violence against women and is approaching a second target set out in its national development plan to reduce poverty by 2030, yet progress remains limited. Government officials said that their data suggests the problem is not just severe, but worsening. Ongoing insecurity, including conflict in the Anglophone regions and violence linked to Boko Haram in the Far North, has displaced communities and heightened risks of violence against women and girls while

undermining already inadequate access to protection, justice, and social services. At the same time, economic pressures, displacement linked to conflict, and rising living costs have heightened women's dependence on land, increased their need for social services, and worsened their exposure to violence, areas where institutional neglect is most acute.

Without urgent action, the government's failure will not only be about missing a commitment but also deepening patterns of violence and dispossession that will persist across generations.

Cameroon has obligations under international and regional human rights law, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) to eliminate discrimination in law and practice, prevent violence, and ensure effective remedies for survivors. Meeting these obligations requires more than rhetorical commitments. It demands legal reform, adequate and sustained funding for survivor-centered services, meaningful training of police and judicial officials, and concerted efforts to address the root causes of violence, including women's limited access to and control over land, property, and financial resources.

To fulfill its promise to dramatically reduce violence against women, the government urgently needs to reform discriminatory laws, adopt and implement a comprehensive Family Code, establish a coordinated national response to domestic violence, and ensure accessible services across the country. Donors and development partners should support these efforts through sustained, coordinated funding and by prioritizing programs that strengthen women's economic autonomy and access to justice. Without decisive action, violence against women in Cameroon will remain pervasive and the costs of inaction will continue to be borne by women and girls whose rights, safety, and dignity are routinely denied.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch conducted research in September and December 2024 in three towns in three regions of Cameroon: Maroua in the Far North, Douala in the Littoral, and Buea in the South West.

These regions were chosen to reflect the complex dynamics around violence against women and control over property, land, and financial autonomy. They were also chosen to take into consideration the influences of legal pluralism; Cameroon has French civil law in the majority of regions, including the Far North and the Littoral, and English common law in the two Anglophone regions, including the South West. The selected research locations also reflect Cameroon's religious diversity and demographics—with the majority Muslim North, and majority Christian southern regions such as Littoral and South West.

Cameroon is experiencing a security crisis, with an armed conflict in the Far North Region pitting the Islamist armed group Boko Haram against Cameroonian security forces, and an armed separatist insurgency in Anglophone regions. Our research methodology had to adapt to security challenges by focusing mainly on women in urban areas that were secured and far away from active conflict areas, but we also sought to capture the impacts of insecurity by including research in violence-affected areas, and interviewing women experiencing conflict-related displacement.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 60 women, aged between 18 and 71, including 11 over 50, who had experienced physical, psychological, and economic violence. We used small group and individual interviews to examine how women experience different forms of violence—physical, psychological, and economic—and how their experiences are shaped by power relations at institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels, and influenced by their individual characteristics including marital status, parenthood, workforce participation, and life stage. Small groups were made up of three to five people depending on if respondents preferred to be interviewed in a group. Small groups included a mix of individuals with different marital status: married, separated, divorced, widowed, and cohabitation. The interviewees and groups discussed themes such as inheritance, access and control of matrimonial property, and decision-making and control of own finances, assets, and employment. Individual interviews were conducted with participants who

preferred a one-on-one setting, and to follow up with some individuals who participated in a small group interview to get more information and clarifying details.

Human Rights Watch interviewed three religious leaders and seven government officials who represent government agencies that provide services relevant to violence against women, including officials from regional delegations, the regional ministry offices, of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille, MINPROFF), and the Ministry of Social Affairs (Ministère des Affaires Sociales, MINAS).

All interviews were conducted in English, French, or Fulfulde. For interviews in Fulfulde, Human Rights Watch worked with a female interpreter who is a social worker, familiar with research methods, and affiliated with a local women's rights partner organization. Interviewees did not receive any compensation or incentive to take part. All interviewees provided their informed consent to the interviews and were advised that they had no obligation to take part and were free to refuse to answer any question and to end the interview at any time.

The report withholds identifying details to protect victims' and survivors' privacy and possible reprisals from government authorities.

The report provides financial information in the local currency Franc Coopération Financière en Afrique centrale (Financial Cooperation in Central Africa, with currency code FCFA XAF). At time of writing, the FCFA XAF has an exchange rate of \$1 = 568 FCFA

For this research, Human Rights Watch collaborated with Cercle des Educateurs Solidaires des Quartiers Reunis (CESOQUAR), in partnership with Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF-Cameroon).

On May 28, 2026, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF) to share its research findings and request information but did not receive a response.

Background

In 2011, Cameroon adopted a national gender policy (2011-2020) to promote a fair and equal society between men and women.¹ A strategy to combat violence against women was adopted in 2016 (2017-2020) and revised in 2022.² The 2022 National Strategy to Combat Gender-based Violence (GBV) was developed against a more complex backdrop, given the armed crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, which escalated in 2016, and has significantly increased gender-based violence, particularly in conflict areas. The 2022 launch included both the national strategy to combat gender-based violence and the national action plan for the elimination of female genital mutilation, suggesting a more integrated approach.³ All three versions of the strategy to combat GBV include the aim of halving the prevalence of violence. In the 2016 version the target was to achieve this goal by 2020. In the 2022 version, the target date was 2026.⁴ In practice, however, Cameroon's government has not taken meaningful steps toward achieving this goal and therefore, it is no surprise that each plan has failed to meaningfully reduce violence against women.

The government has failed to put in place the legal framework, services, and resources necessary to reduce gender-based violence and address the needs of survivors across the country. The Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) and its chairman, Paul Biya, have governed Cameroon for more than four decades.⁵ This is not a case of successive governments failing to act — it is the same party, the same President, bearing uninterrupted responsibility for the absence of meaningful legislative action to eliminate violence against women.

Prevalence of Violence Against Women

According to Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 2018, the most recent year for which DHS data is available, over 40 percent of girls and women (four in 10 women or 44

¹ National Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Cameroon, "Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon: Magnitude and Challenges," August 2020, National Institute of Statistics, <https://www.arc.int/gender-drmp/IMG/pdf/gender-based-vio-bc38c827.pdf>.

² Republic of Cameroon, National Strategy to Combat Gender-based Violence 2022-2026, United Nations, 2022, <https://minproff.cm/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NATIONAL-STRATEGIY-TO-COMBAT-GBV.pdf>.

³ Cameroon, National Action Plan for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (2022-2026),

⁴ Republic of Cameroon and United Nations (UN), National Strategy to Combat Gender Based Violence 2022-2026, <https://minproff.cm/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NATIONAL-STRATEGIY-TO-COMBAT-GBV.pdf>

⁵ Republic of Cameroon, 40th Anniversary of the CPDM: Paul Biya in Triumph, The Presidency of Cameroon, undated, <https://www.prc.cm/en/news/7676-40th-anniversary-of-the-cpdm-paul-biya-in-triumph> (accessed May 18, 2026).

percent) aged 15–49 who are in, or have been in, a union reported experiencing emotional, physical, or sexual violence by a current or former partner at some point.⁶ Seventy-seven percent of those that reported violence (34 percent of the 44 percent), reported they experienced physical violence. However, the numbers across the country skewed significantly, and in some parts of the country the figure was much higher, for example in the Centre Region (excluding Yaounde, the nation’s capital) where it reached 64 percent.⁷ Combined data from multiple United Nation agencies and the World Health Organization (WHO) estimate that 39 percent of all women and girls who have ever been in a relationship (ever-partnered women and girls) aged 15 to 49 had experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime in Cameroon.⁸ The minister of the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Promotion of the Family said that 77 women were killed in 2024 by their current or previous partners.⁹ The real number is likely significantly higher given the prevalence of under-reporting (see below).¹⁰ The accuracy of the data may also be affected by difficulties in reaching some groups of women and girls, for example rural and displaced people. Neither international organizations nor the government collect data on the prevalence of violence against women aged 50 and older.

Discrimination and Denial of Economic Autonomy Contribute to Violence

In 2024, the World Economic Forum ranked Cameroon 97 out of 146 countries worldwide, and 20 out of 35 countries across Africa, on the Global Gender Gap Index, which tracks gender parity across economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.¹¹ In 2023, Cameroon ranked 148 out of 162 countries in the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, reflecting significant disparities

⁶ National Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Cameroon, “Enquête Démographique et de Santé du Cameroun 2018,” February 2020, <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR360/FR360.pdf>, p. 394.

⁷ Ibid., p. 397.

⁸ World Bank Group, “Gender Data Portal: Proportion of women who have ever experienced intimate partner violence (% of ever-partnered women ages 15–49),” Undated, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sg-vaw-ipve-zs>

⁹ Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF), “Voices from Cameroon,” December 29, 2025, <https://cameroon.unfpa.org/en/publications/voices-cameroon-2024>, p. 4 (accessed May 18, 2026). See: Bisong Etahoben, “The Alarming Rise of Femicide in Cameroon,” HumAngle, March 10, 2025, <https://humanglemedia.com/the-alarming-rise-of-femicide-in-cameroon/> (accessed May 18, 2026).

¹⁰ Mark T. Yost et al., “Who seeks care after intimate partner violence in Cameroon? sociodemographic differences between a hospital and population sample of women,” PLOS Global Public Health 4(7): e0003408. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0003408> (2024); and Tia Palermo et al., “Tip of the iceberg: Reporting and Gender-based Violence in Developing Countries,” American Journal of Epidemiology, 179(5) (2014):602–612, doi: 10.1093/aje/kwt295.

¹¹ Kusum Kali Pal et al., “Global Gender Gap 2024: Insight Report June 2024,” World Economic Forum, June 11, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/> (accessed October 6, 2025), pp. 12 and 27.

between women and men in the dimensions of reproductive health and access to employment, and, to a lesser extent, education.¹²

The drivers of intimate partner violence—and under-reporting of that violence—include social norms that justify and perpetuate violence against women and discriminatory gender roles and practices within society. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that women in Cameroon spend about 15 percent of their time on unpaid domestic and care work compared to about four percent for men.¹³ Carrying the bulk of care responsibilities impacts women’s ability to enter, keep, and grow within paid work—both formal and informal—and to be economically independent. The World Bank estimates the women’s labor force participation rate (ages 15 and above) in 2024 to be at 57 percent, compared to men’s estimated at 76 percent.¹⁴ Though most Cameroonians—87 percent—work in the informal economy, primarily in subsistence farming, domestic work, and street vending, these activities are typically characterized by low and unstable pay and little job security; 91 percent of women compared to 82 percent of men work in the informal economy.¹⁵

Over 70 percent of the population work in agriculture, and women constitute about 75 percent of workers in the informal agriculture sector.¹⁶ However, despite this overrepresentation, women have limited access and control over land, agricultural or otherwise, due to discriminatory legal provisions, social norms, and political inequities. An estimated 85 percent of land in Cameroon is under customary tenure, and a large proportion of Cameroonians, in urban and rural areas, do not have land certificates or title

¹² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Human Development Reports: Gender Inequality Index (GII),” undated, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII> (accessed October 24, 2025); United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), “Global Database on Violence against Women and Girls,” undated, <https://data.unwomen.org/global-database-on-violence-against-women/country-profile/Cameroon/country-snapshot>; and UNDP, “Human Development Report 2021/2022: Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World,” September 8, 2022, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>. According to the UNDP, Human Development Report 2021/2022, the Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure reflecting inequality between women and men in three different dimensions: reproductive health (maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rate), empowerment (share of parliamentary seats held by women and share of population with at least some secondary education), and labor market participation (labor force participation rate).

¹³ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁴ World Bank Group, “Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) – Cameroon,” undated, International Labour Organization (ILO), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=CM>

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 133-134.

¹⁶ Monica Evans and Laurianne Mefan, “In Cameroon, breaking barriers for women in restoration,” *Forest News*, June 29, 2024, <https://forestsnews.cifor.org/87998/in-cameroon-breaking-barriers-for-women-in-restoration?fnl=> (accessed October 24, 2025).

over the land they occupy.¹⁷ In 2018, the Global Property Rights Index (Prindex), a measurement of people's perception of their property rights, estimated that 52 percent of owners had formal documents proving ownership, 10 percent had informal documents only, and 38 percent had no documents.¹⁸ Although most Cameroonians face challenges in acquiring official title documents over land, there are also stark gender disparities; in 2017, women aged 15 to 49 were issued 1,970 land certificates in their own names, while men in the same age range received 5,862 certificates.¹⁹ In 2018, the year for which the most recent official data is available, women held 3,419 official land titles, and men held 9,427, with men being nine times more likely to be sole owners (with or without official title) of land and homes than women.²⁰ Data is not available for women aged 50 and older.

Women's limited economic autonomy—driven by unequal access to land, informal work, and disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities—reduces their bargaining power within households and constrains their ability to leave or report abusive relationships. In this context, violence operates not only as an expression of inequality, but as a means of enforcing it. Previous research shows that discriminatory gender roles and practices, and gender stereotypes, allow men more decision-making power within households, including during marriage or in consensual unions.²¹ Sometimes, women who may want to be involved in decisions that impact them and their family encounter pushback or backlash, such as accusations of trying to engage in an activity that does not fit within their gender

¹⁷ Amaelle Seigneret, "LandCam: securing land and resource rights and improving governance in Cameroon," 2024, *International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)*, <https://www.iied.org/landcam-securing-land-resource-rights-improving-governance-cameroon> (accessed March 6, 2026); and "LandCam: lessons from six years of linking action, research and advocacy to support land reform," IIED, March 25, 2024, <https://www.iied.org/22381iied>, p. 3.

¹⁸ Prindex, "15 Country Infographics," September 2018, <https://landportal.org/library/resources/15-country-infographics>. Prindex's methodology comprised of a nationally representative sample of 1,496 adults 18 years or older.

¹⁹ Ministry of State Property, "Surveys and Land Tenure, Statistical Data on Land Conservation Activities for the Years 2014-2015-2016-2017," http://www.gutf.cm/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=82&Itemid=493&lang=fr.

²⁰ National Institute of Statistics (Cameroon) and MINPROFF, "2024 Factbook: Women and Men, Girls and Boys in Cameroon," January 17, 2025, https://ins-cameroun.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Factbook_Cameroon_EN_2025_01_17.pdf, p. 91. Article 1428 of the Civil Code, which restricts women's equal rights to manage property during marriage, may contribute to the significant disparity in property ownership.

²¹ See: Lotsmart Fonjong, "Evolving Alliances: Men and Women – Access to Land, Gender Relations and Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon," Women's International League for Peace & Freedom – Cameroon (WILF-Cameroon), 2022, https://www.wilpf.org/mmfp_documents/evolving-alliances-men-and-women-access-to-land-gender-relations-and-conflict-in-anglophone-cameroon/ (accessed January 28, 2026); and Saskia van Veen et al., "'Let's stop thinking it is normal': Identifying patterns in social norms contributing to violence against women and girls across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Pacific," *Oxfam*, November 25, 2018, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/lets-stop-thinking-it-normal> (accessed January 27, 2026).

role and result in them being excluded or “put back in their place.”²² Unemployment and economic strain may worsen tensions around gender roles and backlash.²³ Pushback or backlash at the individual level, in interpersonal relationships, could be physical, economic, psychological or emotional violence.

To counter discrimination against women, the government has the obligation to put in place a legal framework and enabling environment that fosters norm change within the household and society, promotes women’s economic autonomy, supports access to work that pays a living wage, and uplifts women’s decision-making within their households and in the public sphere. This requires a comprehensive response to violence against women within and outside the home. The government’s current policy and resource framework barely scratches the surface.

Lack of Social Security and Social Services Exacerbates Violence

Economic independence for women in Cameroon is undercut by their lack of access to social security or an adequate standard of social services. The failure of the government to meet their obligations in fulfilling these economic rights, increases women’s vulnerability to violence and abuse, and constrains their means to leave abusive relationships.

According to the national poverty threshold, about 37 percent of Cameroon’s population lives in poverty, and 41.2 percent lived on less than 2,370 FCFA (\$4.20) per day, the World Bank’s international poverty line, in 2021.²⁴ Access to social security for all is extremely limited. As of 2021, only 10 percent of the population was covered by the National Social Insurance Fund (CNPS), the country’s main social security program, that covers family benefits; old age, disability, and death pensions; and occupational hazards.²⁵ According to the CNPS website, family benefits include allowances (prenatal, maternity, and family allowances) and medical expenses (pregnancy and daily allowances); and they cover

²² Lindsay J Benstead et al., “Explaining Backlash: Social Hierarchy and Men’s Rejection of Women’s Rights Reforms,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol 30(2), 2023: 496–524, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaco37>; and Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Why Status Matters for Inequality,” *American Sociological Review*, 2014, 79 (1): 1–16. <https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/savvy/journals/ASR/Feb14ASRFeature.pdf>; Candace West et al., “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society*, vol. 1(2) (1987): 135–137.

²³ Christian Groes-Green, “Hegemonic and Subordinated Masculinities: Class, Violence and Sexual Performance among Young Mozambican Men,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 18(4) (2009): 286–304.

²⁴ World Bank Group, “Poverty and Inequality Platform: Cameroon,” 2026, <https://pip.worldbank.org/country-profiles/CMR> (accessed January 14, 2026)

²⁵ National Social Insurance Fund (NSIF/CNPS), Homepage, undated, <https://www.cnps.cm/en/> (accessed January 28, 2026).

pensions for old-age, early old-age, and disability, and survivors (including surviving spouses, children, and ascendant relatives), as well as old-age and survivors' allowances. In January 2026, it was actively insuring 1,338, 542 individuals, representing about four percent of the total population.²⁶ CNPS coverage is largely tied to formal employment, excluding the majority of the 7.3 million informal workers which make up 87 percent of the workforce, predominantly women.²⁷

Cameroon's social security system is highly fragmented and rests primarily on two programs established between 1967 and 1999²⁸:

- A scheme for civil servants administered by the government; and
- The National Social Insurance Fund (Caisse Nationale de Prévoyance Sociale - CNPS) for workers covered by the Labour Code, which provides pensions, family allowances, work injury compensation, and maternity benefits.

While the CNPS administered pension was extended to own-account workers in 2014, coverage remained minimal, reaching only 250,000 individuals by 2020.²⁹ Given women's lower labor participation rates and their overwhelming concentration in the informal economy, women are less likely than men to be covered by any of the CNPS programs. For example, in 2024, the proportion of men (13.9 percent) with insurance coverage in their main job is almost twice that of women (7.4 percent).³⁰ These structural gaps in coverage undermine women's income security throughout life and heighten their dependence on men or family members, increasing their vulnerability to violence and abuse, more so for older

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ International Labor Organization (ILO), "Social Protection – Cameroon," undated, <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=CM>, (accessed January 14, 2026).

²⁸ Republic of Cameroon, Law No.69-LF-18 of 10 November 1969, establishing the Old-Age, Invalidity and Death Pension Insurance Scheme, amended by Laws No.84-007 of 4 July 1984 and No.90-063 of 19 December 1990; Decree No.74-733 of 19 August 1974 to lay down the Terms of Application of Law No.69-LF-18 of 10 November 1969, establishing an Insurance Scheme for Old-Age, Invalidity and Death Pensions; Ordinance No.73-17 of 22 May 1973, to organise Social Insurance, amended by Law No.84-006 of 4 July 1984; and Decree No.74-26 of 11 January 1974, to lay down the conditions of application of certain provisions of Ordinance No.73-17 of 22 May 1973, to organise Social Insurance, amended by Decree No.99-223 of 30 September 1999, <https://www.cnps.cm/images/imprimes1/recueiltextesbasecnps2021%201.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026).

²⁹ International Labor Organisation, Social Protection - Cameroon, 2021, <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=CM>, (accessed January 14, 2026).

³⁰ National Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Cameroon, "Gender and labour market in Cameroon: Findings and suggestions, Policy Guidance Notes," December 2024, https://ins-cameroun.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Policy-brief_genre-et-marche-du-travail_version-anglaise-du-30_12_2024.pdf.

women, and constraining their ability to leave abusive relationships. This is made worse by the fact that a widow loses eligibility to collect survivors' pension if they remarry.³¹

There are also few social assistance programs in Cameroon, and they are limited in scope and coverage. In addition, there are donor funded short-term programs targeted at specific groups, including humanitarian assistance from bilateral (foreign country development agencies) and multilateral (e.g. United Nations agencies such as the World Food Programme) sources, and cash-based interventions (CBIs), programs in which cash transfers or vouchers for goods and services are directly provided to individuals, households, or communities carried out by international organizations such as the World Bank-supported Social Safety Net Project (SSNP), and the International Rescue Committee's cash transfer programs.³² These programs reach only a small share of the population focused mainly on internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugee communities in the Far North, South West and North West regions. Existing programs are heavily donor-funded, with the government financing only about a quarter of total social assistance spending.³³ This underfunding reflects a broader failure to build a comprehensive and rights aligned social security system that addresses poverty and income insecurity, including for women experiencing violence.³⁴

³¹ Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 69-LF-18 of November 10, 1969, Establishing the Old-Age, Invalidity and Death Pension Insurance Scheme, amended by Laws No. 81-007 of July 4, 1984, and No. 90-063 of December 19, 1990, Section 12(5), "The pension right of the surviving spouse shall be annulled in case of remarriage."

³² World Food Programme: Cameroon, undated, <https://www.wfp.org/countries/cameroon>; Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), "Implementation Completion Report Review: Cameroon - CM Social Safety Nets (English), Implementation Completion Report Review, World Bank Group, October 17, 2024, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101624221011100>; and Julie Freccero et al., "Safer Cash in Conflict: Exploring Protection Risks and Barriers in Cash Programming for Internally Displaced Persons in Cameroon and Afghanistan," *International Review of the Red Cross* 101(911), (2019): 685–713, <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/safer-cash-conflict-exploring-protection-risks-and-barriers-cash-programming-internally> (accessed January 28, 2026).

³³ Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), "Implementation Completion Report Review: Cameroon - CM Social Safety Nets (English)," *op. cit.* p. 11.

³⁴ It is worth noting that in the absence of a universal social security system that includes adequate prevention, protection, and redress mechanisms, evidence suggests that narrowly targeted transfers can cause conflict and tension within communities and even increase women's exposure to violence. The final report of the World Bank program referenced above identified GBV as a key social safeguard risk, noting that cash or wage transfers to households often triggered physical violence against women, who were beaten by male partners seeking to maintain control over the funds. Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), "Implementation Completion Report Review: Cameroon - CM Social Safety Nets (English)," *op. cit.* p. 12. Similarly, key informants in the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) cash and protection programs in the Far North, Cameroon reported increased household tension, male backlash, and incidents of domestic violence when women were targeted as direct cash recipients. (Julie Freccero et al., *op. cit.*).

In addition to insufficient social security, lack of public services also contributes to poverty, with a disproportional impact on women.³⁵ Specifically, a lack of social services, such as shelters, has a direct impact on women victims of violence. Cameroon does not have a centralized, government-run system of residential shelters for domestic violence and GBV victims and survivors, and no specific budget allocation for residential shelters in operations of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille, MINPROFF). As of 2023, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in collaboration with MINPROFF and local civil society organizations provided 24 safe spaces tied to humanitarian assistance in crisis intervention spots.³⁶ Even when public funds are allocated, such as the FCFA 18 billion invested in 2023, corruption, administrative bottlenecks, slow procedures, weak public financial management, and a mismatch between competencies and resources, limit the reach and effectiveness of these programs.³⁷

Main Budgetary Allocation 2025 – 2026

The 2025 national budget allocated 77.1 billion FCFA (\$139.5 million) to the social affairs sector, an increase of 10.3 billion FCFA (\$18.7 million) (15 percent) from 2024. Of this, 10.8 billion FCFA (\$19.2 million) was allocated to MINPROFF, accounting for 0.19 percent of the total budget of 5,615.5 billion FCFA (\$9.99 million).³⁸

³⁵ UN Women, World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2024: Harnessing social protection for gender equality, resilience and transformation, 2024, [https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/10/two-billion-women-and-girls-worldwide-lack-access-to-any-form-of-social-protection-un-women-report-shows#:~:text=Women%20are%20lagging%20behind%20on,children%2C%20perpetuating%20poverty%20across%20generations.\(accessed January 30, 2026\); and Elena Camilletti, "Social Protection and Its Effects on Gender Equality: A Literature Review 2020," *UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti*, December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/5836/file/Social-Protection-Effects-Gender-Equality-2020.pdf> \(accessed January 30, 2026\).](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/10/two-billion-women-and-girls-worldwide-lack-access-to-any-form-of-social-protection-un-women-report-shows#:~:text=Women%20are%20lagging%20behind%20on,children%2C%20perpetuating%20poverty%20across%20generations.(accessed%20January%2030,%202026);and%20Elena%20Camilletti,%20%22Social%20Protection%20and%20Its%20Effects%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20A%20Literature%20Review%202020,%22%20UNICEF%20Office%20of%20Research%20%E2%80%94%20Innocenti,%20December%202020,%20https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/5836/file/Social-Protection-Effects-Gender-Equality-2020.pdf(accessed%20January%2030,%202026).)

³⁶ United Nations Population Fund Agency (UNFPA), "Cartographie des Espaces sûrs à l'usage des femmes et des filles fonctionnels dans la région de l'Extrême-Nord, Cameroun," April 30, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cartographie-des-espaces-surs-lusage-des-femmes-et-des-filles-fonctionnels-dans-la-region-de-lextreme-nord-cameroun-avril-2023> (accessed November 3, 2025).

³⁷ Independent Evaluation Group (IEG), "Implementation Completion Report Review: Cameroon - CM Social Safety Nets (English)," <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101624221011100>, p. 11; Chinje Hopeson, "CONAC Reveals 114 Billion FCFA Lost to Corruption in 2023," *The Guardian Post Cameroon*, September 29, 2024, <https://theguardianpostcameroon.com/post/4263/en/conac-reveals-114-billion-fcfa-lost-corruption#:~:text=All%20round%20problem,extortion%20by%20road%20safety%20officers> (accessed April 24, 2026).

³⁸ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, "Citizen Budget 2025: Easy to read and understand," December 31, 2024, <https://rfp.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/MINFI%E2%80%A2BUDGET-CITOYEN-2025-Tout-public-Version-Anglaise-311224.pdf>, p. 32.

The 2026 national budget allocated 77.8 billion FCFA (\$140.8 million) to the social affairs sector, now called social affairs and employment sector, approximately a 1.17 percent increase from the previous year.³⁹ However, MINPROFF is allocated 10 billion FCFA (\$18.1 million) of that, a decrease of approximately 6.54 percent from 2025. MINPROFF's allocation accounts for about 0.17 percent in 2026.⁴⁰

Gender-Sensitive Spending Across 10 Pilot Ministries

According to the government, its spending directed at reducing gender inequality and empowering women, which it refers to as “gender-responsive spending,” in 2025 amounted to 92.46 billion FCFA (\$164.4 million), an increase of 20.04 billion FCFA (27.7 percent) (\$35.6 million) from 2024.⁴¹ This spending, which represents about 1.28 percent of the national budget and a 1.0 percent increase from 2024, is spread across 10 pilot ministries, including MINPROFF (6.48 billion FCFA/\$11.5 million) and MINAS (1.7 billion FCFA/\$3 million).⁴²

In 2026, gender-sensitive spending decreased about 2.2 percent from 92.46 billion FCFA (\$167.3 million) in 2025 to 90.41 billion FCFA (\$163.6 million) in the 2026 budgetary allocations.⁴³ The allocation to MINPROFF reduced from 6.48 billion FCFA (\$11.74 million) in 2025 to 5.79 billion FCFA (\$10.5 million) in 2026, a 10.59 percent decrease.

An Inadequate and Discriminatory Legal Framework on Violence Against Women

To fulfil its repeated promises to dramatically reduce violence against women and girls, the government needs to bring reforms to the legal framework. Cameroon's legal system is

³⁹ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, “Citizen Budget 2026: Easy to read and understand,” December 2025, https://www.dgb.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/CITIZEN-BUDGET-2026_-ENGLISH-VERSION.pdf, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, “Citizen Budget 2025: Easy to read and understand,” p. 42.

⁴² The ten pilot ministries include Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF), Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), Ministry of Decentralization and Local Development (MINDDEVEL), Ministry of Basic Education (MINEDUB), Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC), Ministry of Finance (MINFI), Minister of the Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT), Ministry of Public Health (MINSANTE), Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER), and the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries (MINEPIA).

⁴³ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, “Citizen Budget 2026: Easy to read and understand,” p. 51.

bi-jural, combining common and civil law, which reflects its colonial legacy. It retains laws inherited from France and England; many remain in force under the Constitution. Court procedures vary by jurisdiction, reflecting this dual legal system. Some areas of substantive and procedural law, such as criminal, land, labor, business, and criminal procedure laws, have been harmonized; however, a draft unified Civil Procedure Code has remained under review for more than two decades.⁴⁴

Cameroon's 1996 constitution guarantees equality between women and men before the law, but also incorporates Cameroon's international human rights obligations, and Cameroon is a party to many international and regional human rights treaties, which guarantee equality between women and men and girls and boys.⁴⁵

The government has also adopted national policies that support equality between men and women, including its 2035 Vision, the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 (NDS 30), a National Gender Policy, and a National Strategy to Combat Gender Based Violence 2022-2026.⁴⁶ However, despite these stated commitments to gender equality, women continue to face discrimination in law and practice that leaves them vulnerable to violence.

The 1968 Civil Code

The Civil Code institutionalizes gender inequality by designating the husband as the head-of-household and limiting married women's autonomy in critical areas of family life, including their choice of residence, professional pursuits, and authority over managing

⁴⁴ The Penal Code, the Labour Code, Land Law, the Criminal Procedure Code, OHADA (Organization for the Harmonization of Business law in Africa) law, acceded to by Cameroon on October 17, 1993.

⁴⁵ Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 96-6 of January 18, 1996 to amend the Constitution of June 2, 1972, preamble and art. 2. Among the human rights treaties to which Cameroon is a party with strict gender non-discrimination and obligations are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC).

⁴⁶ Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development of the Republic of Cameroon, "Cameroon Vision 2035," June 2009, https://www.cameroon-embassy.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Cameroon_VISION_2035_English_Version.pdf; Ministry of Economy, Planning and Land Management of the Republic of Cameroon, "NDS30 National Development Strategy 2020-2030," December 2020, https://www.effectivecooperation.org/system/files/2022-01/NATIONAL_DEVELOPMENT_STRATEGY_2020_2030.pdf; and Republic of Cameroon and United Nations (UN), "National Strategy to Combat Gender Based Violence 2022-2026," <https://minproff.cm/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NATIONAL-STRATEGIY-TO-COMBAT-GBV.pdf>.

matrimonial and their individual property.⁴⁷ The husband's overriding authority in these matters not only limits the wife's rights but also perpetuates a legal framework where women are economically and socially dependent on their husbands, thus reinforcing unequal power dynamics in marriage. Such discriminatory provisions, including wording that implies spouses must adhere to traditional gender roles, restrict women's rights and increase women's vulnerability to violence.

The 1968 Civil Code imposes and reinforces gender inequality in multiple ways, putting Cameroon in violation of its obligations under the constitution, regional, and international law, on women's rights to non-discrimination including to own, manage, and control property on an equal basis to that of their spouse:⁴⁸

- a) *Choice of Matrimonial Home (Article 215)*: The husband has sole authority to choose the family residence, and the wife is obliged to live there, regardless of her personal judgment or preferences. The wife can only seek alternative accommodation with judicial authorization, which is contingent on her proving that the residence presents "physical or moral dangers for the family." This creates an extraordinary power imbalance, where the husband's authority and control over the wife and the family are enshrined in law. This perpetuates gender inequality by relegating the woman to a subordinate position, denying her the authority to make key decisions about the household.
- b) *Right to Work (Art. 223)*: A married woman is permitted to work in a profession separate from her husband's only if he does not oppose it. If she makes contracts without her husband's consent and with parties aware that her husband does not consent, those contracts are void. The only exception is that she can seek authorization from a court to work over

⁴⁷ The Republic of Cameroon, The Civil Code, 1968, <http://jafbase.fr/docAfrique/Cameroun/CODE-CIVIL-CAMEROUNAIS%20complet.pdf>, arts. 215, 223, 1421, 1422 and 1428.

⁴⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 96-6 of 18 January 1996, amendment to the Constitution of 2 June 1972, Preamble: "ownership shall mean the right guaranteed every person by law to use, enjoy and dispose of property. No person shall be deprived thereof, save for public purposes and subject to the payment of compensation under conditions determined by law," https://www.assnat.cm/images/The_constitution.pdf (accessed January 09, 2026); and for regional and international law obligations see Section on Cameroon's Human Rights Obligations.

her husband's objection, if she can convince the court that this would be in the family's interest. This restriction is a clear violation of women's personhood and autonomy and right to work.⁴⁹ It undermines the wife's independence, including economic independence, reinforcing inequality and subordination in marital relationships.

- c) *Property Management (Arts. 1421, 1422 and 1428)*: The husband has sole authority to administer all of the community property, including the ability to sell, mortgage, or dispose of assets, without the wife's participation.⁵⁰ However, he should not, even for the benefit of their common children, dispose *inter vivos* (transfer or gift during his lifetime) and free of charge of community property without his wife's consent.⁵¹ Furthermore, the husband has authority to manage his wife's personal property, including movable possessions. If he chooses to dispose of her immovable property (such as buildings), he must obtain her consent. These provisions effectively strip the wife of the ability to manage her own possessions or wealth or the couple's matrimonial property, making her dependent on the husband's decisions. This reinforces her subordination, fostering an unequal power dynamic in marriage.

Legal framework governing marriage, marital property, and inheritance

Spouses-to-be can be married based on statutory law by a civil status registrar or based on customary law, with the option to declare a customary marriage to a civil status registrar for transcription.⁵² In a statutory marriage, couples can choose their matrimonial or property regime on their marriage certificate.⁵³ Though the 2024 Civil Status Registration

⁴⁹ Similarly, Law No.2011/011 of 6th May 2011 to amend and complete certain provisions of Ordinance No.81/02 of 29th June on the Civil Status Registration and various provisions relating to the status of physical persons, Section 74(2), upholds the husband's right to object to the wife's employment in the interest of the marriage or the Children.

⁵⁰ Civil Code, art. 1421. The husband alone administers the community property. He may sell, transfer, and mortgage it without the wife's consent or participation.

⁵¹ Civil Code, art. 1422. The husband may not, even for the benefit of the couple's children, make *inter vivos* gifts of community property without his wife's consent.

⁵² Civil Status Registration, law No. 2024/016 of December 23, 2024, arts. 49-51.

⁵³ Civil Status Registration, *op. cit.* art. 41, which amends Civil Status Registration, Ordinance No. 81 – 02 of June 29, 1981, art. 49, “where applicable, the mention of the existence of a marriage contract: co-ownership or separation of property.”

law does not specify regime options, the 1981 law provided that spouses-to-be can choose community of property (co-ownership) or separation of property. In a customary marriage, the property regime can be based on the native law and custom of the tribe of the couple, if they are from the same tribe. If they are from different tribes, the native laws and customs of the woman's or the man's tribe can be applicable. Cameroon has more than 250 tribes and most of these tribes have native laws and customs that are discriminatory towards women owning land or property.

Based on the Civil Code, applicable in the Francophone regions—civil law jurisdiction, where a spouse dies without a will, the surviving spouse is at the bottom of the hierarchy of succession, after descendants (children or grandchild of the deceased), ascendants (parents of the deceased), and collateral blood relatives (sisters, brothers, uncles, and aunts of the deceased).⁵⁴ For widows without independent income, this makes it difficult to secure housing, property, or financial stability after their husband's death, leaving them vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. If the deceased leaves no relatives and no children, the surviving spouse is entitled to the entire estate. If the surviving spouse does not inherit full ownership, the law grants them a right of use (usufruct) over part of the estate. The amount depends on whether the deceased left children, parents, or siblings, and ranges from a quarter of the estate to its entirety. This right will end if the surviving spouse remarries.

Different laws apply under the Common Law jurisdiction, which governs administration of estates generally and designation of personal representatives in the Anglophone regions.⁵⁵ These provisions give the surviving spouse stronger claims to property and provide additional safeguards benefiting a surviving spouse in matters of inheritance and estate management.⁵⁶

Human Rights Watch reviewed a copy of a long-overdue draft Code of the Person and the Family, which aims to create a uniform law across the Anglophone and Francophone

⁵⁴ Civil Code, SECT. II Des droits du conjoint survivant et de l'Etat. art. 767.

⁵⁵ See for example, the Administration of Estates Act 1925, the Intestate Estates Act 1952, the Non-Contentious Probate Rules of 1954, and the Inheritance and Trustees' Powers Act 2014. For a detailed analysis of succession laws in both Anglophone and Francophone regions of Cameroon see, Joseph Nzalé Ebi, "The Structure of Succession Law in Cameroon: Finding a Balance Between the Needs and Interests of Different Family Members" (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2008), https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/300/1/NzaléEbio9PhD_A1a.pdf.

⁵⁶ See, the Intestate Estates Act 1952 and the Inheritance and Trustees' Powers Act 2014.

regions. The bill maintains the order of hierarchy in succession that exists in the current Civil Code, with surviving spouses at the bottom. If promulgated with this provision unchanged, this law would be more regressive than the legal framework currently in force in the Anglophone regions and as a result would take women's rights a step back.⁵⁷

The 2016 Penal Code

Cameroon has no law or laws on domestic violence. It does not treat domestic violence as a distinct category of crime. The government justifies this approach by arguing that domestic violence is already criminalized under the provisions of the Penal Code prohibiting assault.⁵⁸ The Penal Code sets out the elements of the crimes of “grievous harm,” “assault occasioning grievous harm,” “simple harm,” and “slight harm,” and assigns punishments based on the severity of the injury or consequence.⁵⁹ The law places the burden on victims and survivors to bring cases to court themselves, requiring a medical certificate to prove that they were harmed and the level of harm (e.g., grievous, simple, slight).

These provisions have a narrow focus on physical harm, measure the severity of the crime through examining the physical impact on the victim in ways that are not necessarily relevant in domestic violence cases, and lack a clear framework for addressing forms of abuse other than physical assault. Domestic violence related crimes, including intimate partner violence, exist within a complex ecosystem of abuse that often involves ongoing physical, economic, psychological, and emotional violence. These abuses may not result in visible physical harm but could have long-lasting impacts on the victim. Domestic violence often involves a gradual escalation and victims may endure prolonged periods of abuse before they reach a point where the harm qualifies under these sections (i.e., the illness or incapacity lasts for more than 30 days). The focus on “physical sickness” or “incapacity to work” downplays the severity of, and even excludes, cases where harm is psychological, such as trauma or fear-induced harm.

⁵⁷ Draft Civil Code, Chapter 111, Section 919. See also, The Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), “The Cameroon Law Makers Should Protect Widow's Rights When Voting into Law a New Bill on Code on Persons and the Family: Section 919 is Contrary to Common Law Practice,” *Land Portal*, July 1, 2020, <https://landportal.org/news/2021/03/cameroon-law-makers-should-protect-widow%E2%80%99s-rights-when-voting-law-new-bill-code-persons> (accessed September 29, 2025).

⁵⁸ Republic of Cameroon, Law No.2016/007 of 12 July 2016 to establish the Penal Code of Cameroon.

⁵⁹ Penal Code, Sections 277 (Grievous Harm), 279 (Assault Occasioning Grievous Harm), 280 (Simple Harm) and 281 (Slight Harm).

Lack of Recognition of Non-Physical Abuse: Sections 277 (Grievous Harm) and 279 (Assault Occasioning Grievous Harm) focus on physical violence that involves death, injury to or permanent loss of the use, in part or whole, of any organ or senses. Mental or psychological injury is mentioned only in Section 277-3 (Torture), but even here it is tied to physical incapacity, not the broader consequences of sustained mental abuse or fear.⁶⁰ Sections 280 (Simple Harm) and 281 (Slight Harm) focus on sickness and incapacity to work, and do not adequately address the long-term effects of emotional and psychological abuse. Section 302 provides the legal basis to prosecuting threats of violence, including implicit threats, but domestic violence survivors may face challenges in showing or proving that a threat was made “with order or condition” when the threat happens in private without witnesses or recordings, and victims will remain at risk without protection or emergency barring orders, which do not exist under Cameroonian law.⁶¹

Thresholds for Duration of Harm: Sections 280 (Simple Harm) and 281 (Slight Harm) set specific thresholds for the extent (e.g., incapacity to work) and duration of harm to be considered punishable. In Section 280, the harm must last more than 30 days, while Section 281 addresses harm lasting from 8 to 30 days. These thresholds can be problematic in domestic violence cases because victims may not immediately or visibly exhibit symptoms that meet these duration requirements.

The 2016 Penal Code provides some protection against gender-based violence, including criminalizing (female) genital mutilation, child marriage, trafficking and smuggling in persons, and clarifying that marrying the victim may not be a basis for exoneration of a person accused of rape.⁶² It makes it a crime to desert a spouse or child, to fail to provide court-ordered maintenance, or to deprive eligible individuals of a survivor’s pension.⁶³ It is also a crime for a spouse to expel another spouse from the marital home, without legal procedure and legitimate reason. The punishment increases when the expulsion is of a

⁶⁰ Penal Code, art. 277 3(4).

⁶¹ Penal Code, art. 302.

⁶² Penal Code, arts. 277-1, 356(2), 342-1, and 297.

⁶³ Penal Code, arts. 180, 180-1 and 358.

pregnant woman, done by a non-spouse, or involves physical or psychological violence or destruction or confiscation of the victim's property.⁶⁴

While these provisions brought some reforms, major gaps remain. For example, while the 2016 Penal Code sanctions child marriage, it has not been eliminated. Between 2014 and 2024 approximately 30 percent of girls (i.e. under 18) in Cameroon married, and about 3 percent of boys, with child marriage most prevalent in the northern regions.⁶⁵ Cameroon's failure to effectively implement the legislation to end child marriage contributes to the prevalence of domestic violence in the country as research globally has shown that marrying as a child places women at higher risk of domestic violence than marrying as adults.⁶⁶ Without a clear legal framework to address the dynamics of domestic violence—including coercive control, threats, and psychological, economic and emotional abuse—the gaps in the law are so severe as to offer little protection for women in abusive situations, Human Rights Watch research found, as described below.

Long Wait for Legal Reform

In 2023, Professor Marie-Thérèse Abena Ondo, the minister of the Ministry for Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille, MINPROFF) said that the Ministry was working on a bill regarding gender-based violence, but there is no clear timeline for when it will be presented to parliament.⁶⁷ This lack of a timeline is especially worrying because the government has been working on a comprehensive Family Code—that could supersede the provisions that are discriminatory against women in the current Civil Code—for over two decades.

When Cameroon ratified the Maputo Protocol in 2012, it did so with reservations.⁶⁸ Cameroon's reservation states that its adoption of the treaty “should in no way be construed as endorsement, encouragement or promotion of homosexuality, abortion

⁶⁴ Penal Code, art. 358-1.

⁶⁵ Girls Not Brides, “Cameroon: Prevalence Rates,” undated, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/cameroon/> (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁶⁶ Edilberto Loaiza, “Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage,” United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2012, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁶⁷ Mboro Mesumbe Bwang, “Alarming Rate of Gender-Based Violence: Gov't Reveals 56 Women Killed this Year,” *The Guardian Post Cameroon*, November 29, 2023, <https://theguardianpostcameroon.com/post/1971/en/alarming-rate-of-gender-based-violence-govt-reveals-56-women-killed-this-year-> (accessed March 31, 2025).

⁶⁸ Cameroon along with Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, and Uganda has ratified with reservations.

(except therapeutic), genital mutilation, prostitution, or any other practice which is not consistent with universal or African ethical and moral values."⁶⁹ The broad and vague language of this reservation risks significantly weakening the Protocol's human rights protections within the country.

The government's actions reinforce concerns that it does not intend to fully comply with its obligations under the Maputo Protocol. In December 2024, the government suspended the activities of four nongovernmental organizations, including at least one that works on violence against women and operates a temporary shelter for gender-based violence survivors.⁷⁰ The abrupt suspension affected survivors' access to support and resulted in some survivors being forced onto the streets when the offices and facilities, including the temporary shelter, were sealed by government officials.

This is just one example of a pattern of government actions, that, alongside the glacial pace of law reform and the failure to allocate adequate resources, demonstrate a lack of political will to change the status quo on violence against women in Cameroon.

Cameroon's Complex Context

Cameroon is diverse in linguistic, legal, and religious terms. Administratively, the country is divided into 10 regions: Adamawa, Centre, East, Far North, Littoral, North, North West, West, South, and South West. Linguistically, the North West and South West regions are English-speaking (Anglophone) while the other eight are French-speaking (Francophone), a divide derived from Cameroon's colonial history. The legal system has a similar bifurcation based on the country's colonial history, with civil law in the majority Francophone regions and common law in the minority Anglophone regions, though the government has taken some steps to harmonize some laws such as with the Penal Code. According to Pew 2020 data, about 70 percent of the population is Christian, 25 percent Muslim, and two percent

⁶⁹ Justice Lucy Asuagbor, "Status of Implementation of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 60th Meeting—Commission on the Status of Women," March 18, 2016, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/special-rapporteur-on-rights-of-women-in-africa-presentation-for-csw-implementation.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁷⁰ "Cameroon: Minister Suspends Prominent Human Rights Group," Human Rights Watch news release, December 17, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/17/cameroon-minister-suspends-prominent-human-rights-group>; and "Cameroon Suspends NGOs, Harming Gender-Based Violence Survivors," commentary, Human Rights Watch Dispatch, January 9, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/09/cameroon-suspends-ngos-harming-gender-based-violence-survivors>.

a mixture of unaffiliated and other religions.⁷¹ The majority of Christians reside in the southern and western regions, while the highest percentage of Muslims reside in the northern regions including Adamawa, Far North, and North. Across all religious groups, many practice some aspects of traditional beliefs.

Cameroon today faces complex security challenges across its Anglophone regions and its northern regions. Armed separatist groups have been waging a campaign of violence against security forces and civilians in the North West and South West Regions since 2016, and in the Far North, the Islamist armed group Boko Haram has led an armed insurgency against Cameroonian armed forces since 2013 in the Far North region, and has also targeted civilians in deadly attacks.⁷² Cameroonian authorities have responded to both crises with violence and abusive counterinsurgency operations.⁷³ These crises have resulted in approximately 1 million people having been internally displaced (internally displaced persons, IDPs) as of September 2025.⁷⁴ The insecurity and displacement have disrupted formal and informal employment and other economic activities such as farming. This has increased pressure on public services and competition for employment within urban centers that are host to hundreds of thousands of IDPs. These pressures can also heighten tensions within households, worsening the prevalence of violence against women.

Douala

Douala is the administrative headquarters of the Littoral region and the chief port city of Cameroon, about 210 kilometers from Yaounde, the nation's capital. It is the most populous city with an estimated 2025 population of 4,350,000 and is a major industrial

⁷¹ Pew Research Center, "Religious Composition by Country: 2010-2020," June 9, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2020/> (accessed December 2, 2025).

⁷² "Cameroon: Killings, Destruction in Anglophone Regions," Human Rights Watch news release, July 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/19/cameroon-killings-destruction-anglophone-regions>; and "Cameroon: Boko Haram Suicide Bombers Strike Displacement Site," Human Rights Watch news release, August 25, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/cameroon-boko-haram-suicide-bombers-strike-displacement-site>.

⁷³ Amnesty International, *Cameroon's secret torture chambers: Human rights violations and war crimes in the fight against Boko Haram* (London: Amnesty International, 2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr17/6536/2017/en/> (accessed on December 9, 2025); and "Cameroon: Civilians Massacred in Separatist Area," Human Rights Watch news release, February 25, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/25/cameroon-civilians-massacred-separatist-area>.

⁷⁴ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), "Operational Data Portal: Forcibly Displaced Persons in Cameroon," September 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/cmr> (accessed October 7, 2025).

center of central Africa.⁷⁵ The population is diverse and majority Francophone. The Littoral region is one of the eight French-speaking regions of Cameroon and under the civil law regime. Since about 2019, the number of IDPs and refugees arriving in Douala has increased due to the Anglophone crisis and Boko Haram insurgency domestically, and instability in the Sahel region beyond Cameroon's borders.⁷⁶ The rapid population growth has contributed to uncontrolled urban expansion and concomitant strains on public services and employment opportunities.

Maroua

Maroua is the administrative headquarters of the Far North region and is a trading center at the crossroads between Chad and Northern Nigeria with an estimated population of 200,000 in 2024. It is part of the Sahel. The population is majority Muslim and Francophone. The Far North region is one of the eight French-speaking regions of Cameroon and under the civil law regime. The region's semi-arid climate and extremely variable rainfall create extended periods of drought, flooding, and land degradation, causing a strain on livelihoods and services, and the arrival of IDPs and refugees compounds this.⁷⁷ Since 2015, the insecurity caused by Boko Haram insurgency and instability across the Sahel region has resulted in increased inflows of IDPs from rural areas and refugees from Nigeria and Chad into the city.⁷⁸

Buea

Buea is the administrative headquarters of the South West region with an estimated population of 587,000 inhabitants in 2025.⁷⁹ The population is majority Anglophone. The South West region is one of the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon and is under the common law regime. Violent confrontations between armed separatist groups and

⁷⁵ Britannica, "Douala, Cameroon," undated, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Douala> (accessed October 7, 2025); and World Population Review, Cameroon: Douala, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/cameroon/douala> (accessed December 2, 2025).

⁷⁶ UN-Habitat's Urban Practices Branch, Planning, Finance and Economy Section, Urban Planning and Infrastructure in Migration Context: Douala Spatial Profile Cameroon – Volume 1 – Spatial Profile," October 6, 2022, <https://unhabitat.org/douala-spatial-profile-cameroon> (accessed October 7, 2025).

⁷⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Maroua 1er, Cameroon," undated, <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/learning-cities/maroua-1er> (accessed December 1, 2025).

⁷⁸ Amnesty International, "Cameroon: Indiscriminate Attacks Mark Dangerous Turn in Regional Conflict," July 23, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/07/cameroon-indiscriminate-attacks-mark-dangerous-turn-in-regional-conflict/> (accessed December 9, 2025).

⁷⁹ Buea Municipal Council, "A Brief History of Our City," undated, https://bueacouncil.com/?page_id=1265.

security forces in various parts of the two anglophone regions since 2016 has led to widespread displacement of people within and out of both regions, including to neighboring Nigeria, and particularly to urban areas like Buea where the presence of security forces is heavier.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Protection Cluster Strategy – North West & South West of Cameroon,” August 2019, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/70912>.

Failure to Prevent and Protect Women from Violence

Human Rights Watch interviewed 60 women who were survivors of domestic violence, across the three study communities. The experiences of the women Human Rights Watch interviewed highlighted grave violations of their fundamental human rights, particularly their rights to equality, dignity, security, and freedom from violence and discrimination, underscoring urgent gaps in state protection. Survivors consistently identified economic harm and deprivation, including property dispossession, and denial of financial support for children, compounded by physical, and psychological and social abuse. Women who attempted to report violence often faced trivialization by authorities, barriers linked to corruption, or threats from perpetrators with powerful connections. These violations are rooted in entrenched patriarchy, as well as the failure of state institutions to ensure protection and access to justice.

Women's intersecting identities, including age, marital, and disability status affect how domestic violence shows up in their lives.⁸¹ An official of the Ministry of Social Affairs (Ministère des Affaires Sociales, MINAS) in Douala who has a visual disability stressed that, "women with disabilities experience physical, psychological, verbal, and economic abuse 10 times greater than other women."⁸² Stereotypes and misunderstandings about disability, alongside discriminatory gender and social norms can heighten women with disabilities' risk of violence and shape their experiences of it.⁸³ A 2022 global review found that women with disabilities report higher rates of all forms of intimate partner violence compared to women without disabilities.⁸⁴

⁸¹ World Health Organization, "WHO calls for greater attention to violence against women with disabilities and older women," March 27, 2024, <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-03-2024-who-calls-for-greater-attention-to-violence-against-women-with-disabilities-and-older-women> (accessed February 2, 2026); Mónica Miriam García-Cuéllar et al., "The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: a systematic review of the literature," *Disability Rehabilitation*, 45(1) (2021):1-8. doi: 10.1080/09638288.2022.2025927; and HelpAge International, "Violence Against Older Women," <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/gender-equality/violence-against-older-women/> (accessed February 2, 2026)

⁸² Human Rights Watch interview with a focal point person, Littoral Regional Delegation, MINAS, Douala, December 6, 2024.

⁸³ World Health Organization (WHO), "Measuring violence against women with disability: data availability, methodological issues and recommendations for good practice," March 27, 2024, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240089563> (April 24, 2026).

⁸⁴ Mónica Miriam García-Cuéllar et al., "The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: a systematic review of the literature."

The government’s own data suggests the problem of violence against women is not just severe, but worsening. An official of the Ministry for Women’s Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille, MINPROFF) in Douala explained that since officials in their delegation—which is the government’s title for regional and local ministry offices—started collecting data on intentional killings of women by men with a gender-related motivation (femicide/feminicide) across four departments in Douala, they recorded 188 reported cases in 2023, and an increase in numbers with 214 reported cases by the third quarter of 2024.⁸⁵ In Buea, the regional delegation of MINPROFF recorded 517 reported cases across six administrative divisions in the South West region in 2024.⁸⁶ It is important to emphasize that the real incidence is almost certainly much higher. Globally, violence against women, especially domestic violence is always underreported and in an environment like Cameroon where victims face harmful social norms, inadequate legal frameworks, and lack of services and accountability, underreporting is likely to be especially acute.

Men Denying Women Resources

The experiences of the women interviewed illustrate the human impact of systemic failures like the discriminatory provisions in the Civil Code, exposing women to economic harm. Below we highlight cases of economic violence, where husbands’ actions have an economic impact linked to abuse, coercion, control, harm, or deprivation.

Disempowering Women During Marriage

Marguerite B., a 44-year-old lawyer in Douala told Human Rights Watch that her husband had fraudulently registered documents including land title certificate and building permits for their home in the name of his son, her stepchild. She said:

My ex-husband and I were married for about 10 years. We had jointly contributed to building a house. He was violent and the violence intensified when I became a lawyer. He would beat and humiliate me. He was loud and everyone in our neighborhood knew. My family intervened, but the physical

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024.

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with a senior official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

and verbal abuse continued. I knew it would not end. I feared for my life. And eventually I left him to protect myself.

During our divorce, I discovered that he had fraudulently registered the land certificate and building permits for our house in the name of his son from a previous relationship. We are now divorced, and he ended up with the house. I am educated, a lawyer, and [my husband's] actions successfully deprived me of my right to the matrimonial property.⁸⁷

Roseline E., a 44-year-old hairdresser in Buea, who was married for 16 years with three children, described how her husband closed her hairdressing salon and sold property they acquired during the marriage without consulting her. She said:

We got married when I was 18. We did the traditional and council marriage, signed monogamy and community property [on the marriage certificate]. He opened a hair salon for me since I had trained as a hairdresser. One morning, I went to work and found that everything had been removed. All equipment gone. I thought it had been stolen. Instead, my husband had sold it all and cancelled my lease ... Much later in our marriage, he sold two plots of land we had owned for 16 years without consulting me. We bought the first when we only had our first child, and the second piece when we had our second. He said he needed the money to bury his father, but I was against selling the land because that was inheritance for our children. He filed for divorce after I reported him to Social Affairs for not supporting me and our children.⁸⁸

Florence N., a 57-year-old woman in Douala, who was in a polygamous marriage and had five children, said that after she had her third child and no job, her husband stopped financially contributing to support their family.⁸⁹ “His justification was that when my father died, he spent a huge sum of money, and when I gave birth by cesarean section, he also

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Marguerite B., Douala, December 4, 2024.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Roseline E., Buea, December 17, 2024.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Florence N., Douala, December 4, 2024.

spent a huge amount of money,” she said. He later abandoned her and their children and has provided no spousal or child support since. She survives by doing multiple odd jobs.

Emerince E., a 53-year-old nurse in Douala, who is the sole wife in a polygamous marriage with community property regime and has six children with her husband said she has had to take measures to justify her claims to their joint property: “I contributed my savings toward building our family home. Yet all receipts and property records were solely in my husband’s name, leaving me without proof of my financial contributions. This shouldn’t be a problem, but I live in constant peril as my husband repeatedly threatens me with the possibility of repudiating me or taking a second wife. To protect myself, I now rely on our children to serve as witnesses to my financial participation in acquiring household assets.”⁹⁰

Charlotte M., a 48-year-old decorator in Douala, who is currently married with a child, said her husband used the land certificate of their primary residence as collateral for a loan. “Credit Mutuel [microfinance] did not consider that I have rights. I didn’t consent to my husband taking a loan and I didn’t consent to him giving up the land certificate of our matrimonial home.”⁹¹

Aminatou H., a 47-year-old woman in Maroua, who was married at 15 and has three children, told Human Rights Watch that her husband had refused to permit her to do paid work to earn an income, but then after 32 years of marriage he kicked her out of their home.⁹² After 20 days of sleeping in a shed, she reported to the gendarmes, who ordered him to “open at least the room where she used to sleep,” which he did. He went to court to get a divorce and to the Lamido [a traditional ruler of the area] to obtain an authorization to sell their home without her consent. The Lamido gave him authorization to sell the house.

Aissatou D., a 39-year-old woman in Maroua, who was married for 14 years with five children, recounted how, after her husband took a second wife and moved to Gabon, his brothers sold their 15 houses and four shops on his behalf.⁹³ Last year, when he attempted to sell the last house where she and her children lived, she tried to stop him. He changed the locks but let her back in after a lot of begging. A few weeks later he sold a portion of

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Emerince E., Douala, December 5, 2024.

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Charlotte M., Douala, December 4, 2024.

⁹² Human Rights Watch interview with Aminatou H., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

⁹³ Human Rights Watch interview with Aissatou D., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

the house where she lived with her children to his younger brother. Although she sought help from the National Commission for Human Rights and Social Affairs, she said she received only advice to file a complaint, without any concrete support. Turning to her family and religious leaders, she was told to let the matter go because her husband had funded her pilgrimages to Mecca. “I gave everything up and returned to live with my parents,” she said.

Men Controlling Women’s Income or Blocking Opportunities

Five different women in Maroua described situations where their husbands refused to support them and their children or had left the household, and then when they looked for other ways to support the household, they encountered resistance from their husbands. Fanne R., a 20-year-old woman, who lives with her husband and two children, said she started a small business selling food and small household provisions in front of their home, but her husband destroyed the wooden stand she had built as well as the goods she was selling, saying “I didn’t give you permission to earn money.”⁹⁴ Habiba A., a 40-year-old woman with 10 children, said she got about 500,000 FCFA (\$890) from her relatives to help her start a business, but her husband took the money to marry a second wife.⁹⁵

This happened within a context of cultural patriarchy where women are considered inferior to men, subservient wives are idealized, and the seclusion of women is promoted. These women often described how they had been encouraged, by both the husbands and the broader community, to stay indoors most of their adult lives and throughout their marriages.

“For 27 years I stayed indoors, like our Muslim community says,” said Adiza M., a 53-year-old woman with six children. “[My husband] didn’t want me to go out or for anyone to visit me. If I talked to anyone outside my family he would beat me, and I accepted it.”⁹⁶

Adiza M. and other interviewees eventually found themselves, out of financial desperation, forced into the public space to try to make a living, while continuing to endure harsh and abusive treatment from their husbands. The Lamido and government authorities did little to help these women.

⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Fanne R., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Habiba A., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Adiza M., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

In other parts of the country, too, women faced similar mistreatment with no help from authorities. Aichatou O., a 28-year-old woman, who lives in Buea with two children and is divorced, said her ex-husband barred her from working, insisting that because he funded her university education, he alone could decide whether she could have a job.⁹⁷ Several years later, he abandoned her and their two young children without providing them with any financial or housing support, leaving her and the children dependent on her mother. Though social welfare briefly compelled him to pay maintenance, he later accused her in court of desertion as grounds for divorce. She said the court provided her legal aid, but the lawyer did not seem interested in her case. Without access to effective legal representation, she relied on guidance from her husband's lawyer. Court-appointed lawyers are very poorly remunerated and further, must pay case-related expenses out-of-pocket with little expectation of reimbursement through complex and corrupt administrative procedures.⁹⁸ The customary court granted her custody of the children who were all below seven and ordered him to pay school expenses and child support, but he defaulted after a single payment. Despite reporting the violation, enforcement proved impossible as he relocated and cut off contact, leaving her and the children without recourse.⁹⁹

For women who have been displaced due to the crises in the South West and the Far North, they manage these traumatic experiences with the added trauma of having lost their home, means of subsistence, and social networks.¹⁰⁰ In a 2023 UNFPA and MINPROFF study on gender-based violence in crisis settings in Cameroon, 95 percent of focus group discussions reported sexual and emotional abuse of women and girls in their communities, 93 percent reported child marriage, 92 percent reported intimate partner violence, and 85 percent reported economic violence, in particular denial of resources, opportunities, and services.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Aichatou O., Buea, December 17, 2024.

⁹⁸ Nana Charles Nguindip, "Smearing the trundles of legal aid in Cameroon: reconsidering the need in appraising the legal framework," *Dixi* vol. 27(2) (2025): 1, 10.16925/2357-5891.2025.02.06; and George Fominyen, "Pro bono is a hard choice to make in Cameroon, lawyers say," *Reuters*, November 16, 2010, <https://news.trust.org/item/20101116153900-pni7r> (accessed April 24, 2026).

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aichatou O., Buea, December 17, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Government of Cameroon and UNFPA, "Voices From Cameroon: 2023," March 12, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/voices-cameroon-2023> (accessed December 5, 2025).

¹⁰¹ Government of Cameroon and UNFPA, "Voices From Cameroon 2023," p. 15.

Economic violence was noted as being especially pervasive, and with a ripple effect of broad negative impacts for women and girls and a strong link to contexts of conflict, increased poverty, and displacement.¹⁰²

Women in Consensual Unions

In Cameroon, marriages may be recognized under civil, and customary, or religious (primarily Islamic) law, with a requirement to register the union at a civil status registry. Some couples, however, live together in the same household for years in stable, marriage-like relationships, with or without children, and without formalizing their union by law or ceremony, in what are commonly known in Cameroon as “come-we-stay” relationships. In relation to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the terms consensual union, cohabitation, domestic partnership, and *de facto* union are used in practice interchangeably to describe such arrangements, regardless of their legal status. The proportion of people in Cameroon surveyed aged 15 – 49 who reported being in a domestic partnership has steadily declined between 1998 and 2018, from 67 percent to 57 percent among women and girls, and from 48 percent to 42 percent among men and boys.¹⁰³ About 19 percent of girls and young women (15-19 years) surveyed in Cameroon’s 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) were in cohabiting relationships, compared with about nine percent of people (15 years and over) sampled in 2021.¹⁰⁴ Economic constraints, the cost of the “bride price”—money and material gifts the groom or his family gives to the family of the bride during a traditional marriage, and inadequate information about civil status procedures contribute to cohabitation.

Women in consensual unions face similar—or even more difficult—challenges to women in marriages registered at the civil status registry, often receiving no spousal support (sometimes called palimony) or child support from their partner, because there is no legal recognition of these unions. Several women Human Rights Watch interviewed, across the three cities, had lived with their male partners for more than a decade and had children with them. When they exited the relationship, however, often due to abusive conduct by

¹⁰² Government of Cameroon and UNFPA, “Voices From Cameroon 2023,” pp. 15 and 27.

¹⁰³ Institut National de la Statistique (INS) de Cameroun, “Enquête Démographique et de Santé du Cameroun 2018,” <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR360/FR360.pdf>, p. 84.

¹⁰⁴ National Institute of Statistics (Cameroon) and Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF), “2024 Factbook: Women and Men, Girls and Boys in Cameroon,” January 17, 2025, https://ins-cameroun.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Factbook_Cameroon_EN_2025_01_17.pdf, p. 19.

their partner, or were abandoned by their partner, they found themselves unable to secure the rights they should have had upon dissolution of the union.

In Douala, Diane F., a 35-year-old businesswoman, who was in a co-habitation for 11 years with a man with whom she had three children, explained the mistreatment she endured:

I started my cybercafé business in 2012. My partner had a bar. We had a child then. He gave me 500,000 FCFA (\$890) to buy the first computers and pay the rent of the café for three months. At the end of every day, I would give him the earnings. If I needed a toner refill and asked him, he would refuse to buy it. Over several years, I saved up and bought more computers and printers. He asked if I could take out a loan of 600,000 FCFA (\$1,068) from my bank for his business. He would sign as a witness and my equipment was the collateral. When the first payment was due, he said he didn't have it.

I couldn't make the payments. I was responsible for buying groceries at home, and he had invited his sister and his niece to live with us. I had to feed six people, including him and our two children. I defaulted on the loan because he refused to make the payments.

I left with my children and moved back to my parents' house, but he doesn't take care of the children. I talked to a neighborhood official who talked to his dad, but nothing came of that. I went to [MINAS] at Mboppi [in Douala II sub-division] to get him to provide child support. [The MINAS official] sent him a summons, but after he visited their office, she wasn't interested in helping me anymore. [The MINAS official] said, 'You did this, you did that.' His compromise was that he would take the children, but I wouldn't be allowed to see or visit them. I dropped the matter.¹⁰⁵

In Buea, Agnes M., a 47-year-old a woman, who has been in a consensual union for 19 years, with four children, described the difficulties her partner created as she tried to manage a business. "My brother gave me 20,000 FCFA (\$36) to start a business. When I

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Diane F., Douala, December 5, 2024.

leave the house, [my husband] goes through my things and takes any money I left at home. Once he asked me to take a loan from my *njangi*—an informal savings and loan system—and then refused to pay it back. He asks me to take food from a provision store around the corner but refuses to pay the merchant.”¹⁰⁶

Mavel M., a 40-year-old woman in Buea, who had lived with her partner for over 12 years with three children, had similar challenges. “I got money from my family to start a small business selling roasted groundnuts in plastic bottles. [My partner] would take about three or four bottles every time, take my money, and not provide for the children. When I complained that [he was taking] my profit, he beat me. I lived in fear. It took me a long time to leave him because I had nowhere to go, my family didn’t want me.”¹⁰⁷ She finally ended the relationship two years ago and moved in with friends.

These cases are not isolated; they represent broader systemic patterns of discrimination and violence that continue unchecked. Given the proportion of men and women in consensual unions or domestic partnerships in Cameroon, the government should address the recognition of these de facto unions in eliminating discrimination against women and protect their property rights. The government’s failure to act perpetuates a climate of impunity and denies women their right to live free from violence and discrimination.

Discrimination Against Women and Economic Harm

Daughters’ Unequal Inheritance

The structural discrimination within the Cameroonian society fosters disparity in women’s access and control of land and property, including financial assets, compared to men. Women face systematic dispossession of land and property by male relatives and in-laws, even when legal documents, wills, or land certificates exist. Brothers and uncles exploit their authority to seize or sell land, often disregarding the deceased parent’s wishes, while widows are threatened and intimidated into relinquishing rights, including through fear of violence. Despite court cases and official papers, the women remain vulnerable,

¹⁰⁶ Traditional or informal savings and loan system, also known as “*tontines*” in the Francophone areas, is a rotating savings and credit group, where members of a community contribute a fixed sum (depending on how many shares (hands) they have) into a pooled fund on a regular basis, and charge higher interest rates than formal institutions; and Human Rights Watch interview with Agnes M., Buea, December 17, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Mavel M., Buea, December 17, 2024.

unsupported by authorities, and deprived of secure access to their rightful inheritance and homes.

Francoise M., a 52-year-old teacher in Douala, described the situation after her father died: “Our father had nine children. He left a will after his death, dividing his property amongst the boys and me, in case I divorce and return home. My oldest brother sold the land in collaboration with our uncles who had the will. The person who bought it might have known that the transaction was illegal because he immediately applied for a land certificate and built a small shack on it. We are still in court fighting the sale.”¹⁰⁸

Rosalie L., a 47-year-old seamstress in Douala, explained that her mother died without a will and left 10 hectares of land in Yaounde.¹⁰⁹ Her mother had a government-issued land certificate over the land. With no will, “my oldest brother has seized control of everything though mom asked that everyone should be involved. He sold the land for about 14 million FCFA (\$24,916). My uncles are behind this, pushing him, and standing as his witness,” she said.

A magistrate in Maroua appeals court explained how she thwarted brothers who were trying to cut their sisters out of their inheritance: “They were asking for an inheritance judgement but only the men were included, no women. When I asked about this, they said that ‘they are married, they live far away, they can’t come to witness.’ I insisted that they must include the women and declare them co-heirs. If the women don’t want it, they can sign it over to them. They left and didn’t return. There is a tendency for men to protect other men (solidarité masculine), but if they get a woman like me [as the magistrate], it’s different.”¹¹⁰

The Civil Code, which regulates family and inheritance issues in the Francophone regions, establishes that children are at the top of the hierarchical order of succession, with the same rights between daughters and sons. That is, each one inherits an equal share in their own right regardless of their gender and whether they were born in or out of wedlock.¹¹¹ In

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Francoise M., Douala, December 5, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Rosalie L., Douala, December 4, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Dalahai, magistrate, Appeals court, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹¹¹ Civil Code, art. 745 (1): “Children or their descendants succeed to their father and mother, grandfather, grandmother, or other ascendants without distinction of sex or of primogeniture... They inherit in equal shares and by head, when they are all in the first degree and called in their own right.”

reality, as described above, daughters are often not acknowledged in the succession papers or, even if noted on title documents, they can be cut out if the administrator of the estate sells the property without their knowledge.

Widows Dispossessed of Land and Property Rights

Government institutions use traditional norms to justify hindering women's ability to exert their right to land and property, especially regarding inheritance for widows and adult daughters. For example, widows and sisters are often excluded from the list of heirs signed by traditional authorities and provided to the courts for the issuance of "letters of administrations" over the deceased's estate. This document can result in sons being given administrative control over whole estates, even when the estate consists of or includes matrimonial property and a widow, or widows, are alive.

Cecile W., a 71-year-old woman, who was widowed 13 years ago after 54 years of marriage, with six children—five daughters and one son—said her children intimidated her, and her son took over her home with his family. Because of the severe and ongoing tensions, she was forced to leave her home and move in with friends. She sought help from the Department of the Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities and Older Persons under the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS). However, the department did not help, and nothing changed; she still does not have control over her home.¹¹² Evidence indicates that older women experience multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination across their lives, including barriers to inheritance, land and property rights, pensions, healthcare, and other essential public services.¹¹³

Edwige L., a 35-year-old widow in Douala, who has three children, told Human Rights Watch how after being married for 17 years, her in-laws took over her matrimonial property after her husband died.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch interview with Cecile W., Douala, December 5, 2024.

¹¹³ Magda Rossmann et al., "Violence against older women," *HelpAge International*, November 2017, www.helpage.org/download/5a1848be4c5ee; Senjooti Roy et al., "'Because I am a woman, an old woman, I have no voice': gendered ageism and disempowerment of older women in three African countries," *Journal of Global Ageing* 1(2) (2024): 238-256, <https://liatayalon.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/joga-article-p238.pdf>; and Alan S. Gutterman, "Ageism and Gender," November 18, 2021, www.researchgate.net/profile/Alan-Gutterman/publication/355478928_Ageism_and_Gender/links/6172foafeef53e51e1cbbdc9/Ageism-and-Gender.pdf.

We had two cars, a house [in Douala], and another in the village. [My husband's] brother took the pickup truck the day after he died. After the funeral, he packed up furniture and appliances from my home, loaded it all on the truck and took it to our home in the village where he lives now. My father-in-law took the other car and confiscated all my husband's important documents, including his bank book and national identification card (ID). After the funeral he moved into my home and declared it the family house since he said he had paid for some of the construction costs and my sister-in-law had bought 10 aluminum roofing sheets.

I took my father-in-law to court asking that he leave my home and return my husband's ID. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law are also claiming my home as their inheritance. We are still in court; it has been seven years of suffering.¹¹⁴

Several other women said they had been evicted from their house after the death of their husband and denied the right to the property that was legally theirs. For example, Grace M., a 47-year-old woman who now lives in Douala, said that after her husband died in the South West region, his family took everything, abandoning her and two little daughters with nothing. When she tried to obtain letters of administration over property that belonged to her and her deceased husband, with her children as beneficiaries, a judge required her to obtain the signatures of her in-laws. He told her that she would have to find a solution with the male relatives of her deceased husband outside of court, although she was legally entitled to at least 50 percent of the property and her children are in the direct line to inherit their father's estate.¹¹⁵

Jeanne E., a 63-year-old widow in Douala, who was married for 38 years with 12 children, explained the barriers she faces in claiming matrimonial property: "I have all the papers that a widow can have but I am afraid to fight my in-laws for my home. I have 12 children, and my in-laws are threatening to harm my children to [intimidate] me. They say they'll see how I will get into the home [and control the property] with all these children," she said.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Edwige L., Douala, December 4, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Grace M., Douala, December 13, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Jeanne E., Douala, December 5, 2024.

This is not an expression of concern regarding a logistical problem, instead it is a calculated threat that she will lose some or all of her children if she stays in the house. She fears that if she fights her in-laws for her home, “they will kill my children with witchcraft.” Witchcraft is a complex belief system in Cameroon, often including supernatural harm, curses, and the use of magic, and is officially prohibited with legal penalties for harm caused by its practice.¹¹⁷ Jeanne’s in-laws appear to be playing on her increased fear of losing a child, after her oldest daughter recently died unexpectedly at a moment when her daughter had plans to travel overseas for work. Jeanne has sought help from traditional and government authorities but, “none of the authorities will help me,” she said.

In Maroua, Therese D., a 49-year-old widow, who was married for 22 years and has eight children, said:

My husband died seven years ago. When he was sick and in the hospital, I called his family, but no one came. As soon as he died, it was like an eruption: they accused me of killing my husband, pillaged, and ransacked our home. He had a brother with the same parents and many half-siblings. My brother-in-law took all important documents from our house, including my husband’s ID, employment decree, pay slips, bank card, and the land documents. My daughter, the oldest child, had to go to Ngaoundere, where her uncle lives to get back her father’s work-related documents, but [the uncle] wouldn’t give up the land documents. I thought I could use his documents from work to claim his CNPS [social security] benefit. Everyone I talk to says that following up the social security would be difficult. I have reached out to CNPS [National Security Fund of Cameroon], but I haven’t heard back.¹¹⁸

In 2020, only about 10 percent of Cameroonians were enrolled in the social security system.¹¹⁹ When a spouse who was enrolled dies, the surviving spouse may be entitled to a survivor’s pension or allowance—typically 50 percent of the deceased spouse’s pension if

¹¹⁷ Witchcraft is illegal with penalties including imprisonment and fines. See: Penal Code, art. 251.

¹¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Therese D., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

¹¹⁹ ILO, “Social Protection: Cameroon Country Profile,” undated, <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=CM>, (accessed September 26, 2025). The coverage primarily extends to public-sector and formal private-sector employees and, to a lesser extent, voluntary contributors who may be outside the formal labor market.

children are involved, or the full amount if there are none.¹²⁰ If the deceased had multiple widows, the benefit is split among them. The pension ends if the surviving spouse remarries.¹²¹

Hadidja N., a 35-year-old widow with seven children in Maroua, said her husband's family proposed that she be "inherited" as a wife by one of her deceased husband's brothers.¹²² Levirate in Cameroon refers to a custom in which a widow is expected to marry her deceased husband's brother or other male relative and sometimes involves the use of coercion. Coercing a widow into a levirate marriage, amounts to forced marriage and is prohibited by law, though it continues in some parts of the country.¹²³ Hadidja said that first, they asked her to go to her parents during the grieving period.¹²⁴ Then, when she returned 10 months later to "reclaim the inheritance of my children," which included a house, farmland, and cows, her brother-in-law said she would have to marry one of them if she wanted access to the property, and if not she would have nothing. She refused their proposition and returned to her parents' home with none of the property.

The laws in Cameroon regarding the property rights of a surviving spouse after the death of the other spouse are vague and confusing and can be discriminatory depending on whether the marriage was based on statutory or customary law. As a result, they are poorly understood and are often applied in discriminatory and arbitrary ways that often reflect harmful gender norms.

As mentioned above in this report, in the civil law jurisdiction (Francophone regions) and based on the Civil Code, where a spouse dies without a will, the surviving spouse is at the

¹²⁰ Republic of Cameroon, Law No. 69-LF-18 of November 10, 1969, Establishing the Old-Age, Invalidity and Death Pension Insurance Scheme, amended by Laws No. 81-007 of July 4, 1984, and No. 90-063 of December 19, 1990, Section 12(1-4) and Section 13(1-3).

¹²¹ Ibid.; Section 12(5), "The pension right of the surviving spouse shall be annulled in case of remarriage."

¹²² Human Rights Watch interview with Hadidja N., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

¹²³ Civil Status Registration, Ordinance No. 81 – 02 of June 29, 1981, art. 77(2); Penal Code, art.356(1);

Veronica Njenu et al., "Critical implications of bride price of Bali Nyonga culture: A Cameroonian study," *Inkanyiso Journal of African Thought* 17(1) a134 (2025): 6 and 8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ink.v17i1.134>; Chynna Bong A. Jan et al, "Widowhood in Post-Conflict Situations: Lessons Learned from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone," Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2025, <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/sites/internet/files/2025-09/ARP-Final-Report---Kylie-Knieriem.pdf>, pp. 16-18; and

Nyongkah Rachel Tati, "Widowhood Rituals and Widow Inheritance in the Balikumbat, Cameroon," *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies* 4(1) (2018): 56-64, <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijhcs/v4-i1/4.pdf>, p. 59.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Hadidja N., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

bottom of the hierarchy of succession, after descendants (children or grandchild of the deceased), ascendants (parents of the deceased), and collateral blood relatives (sisters, brothers, uncles, and aunts of the deceased).¹²⁵

Hierarchy of Succession

1. *Descendants* (Children/Grandchildren/Great-grandchildren)
2. *Ascendants* (parents of the deceased)
3. *Collateral or Blood Relatives* (sisters, brothers, uncles and aunts)
4. *Surviving Spouse*

Cameroonian law allows couples to choose their marital property regime before or during the marriage celebration, such as community of property or separation of property.¹²⁶ However, there are no clear legal definitions of what community of property and separation of property mean, and there is no clear distinction in policy that the surviving spouse's share of matrimonial property under a community of property regime is their property and not part of the estate to be inherited from the deceased spouse.¹²⁷ Court decisions appear to suggest, and two judicial officials interviewed said that, when the matrimonial regime is community of property, the assets acquired during the union belong to both spouses, and so the surviving spouse has the right to retain a share of the property as their own, with only the deceased's share entering the estate to be shared among heirs.¹²⁸ However,

¹²⁵ Civil Code, SECT. II Des droits du conjoint survivant et de l'Etat. art. 767

¹²⁶ Civil Status Registration, Law No. 2024/016 of December 23, 2024, art. 41, which amends Civil Status Registration, Ordinance No. 81 – 02 of June 29, 1981, art. 49, “where applicable, the mention of the existence of a marriage contract: co-ownership or separation of property.”

¹²⁷ See: Joseph Nzalé Ebi, “The Structure of Succession Law in Cameroon: Finding A Balance Between the Needs and Interests of Different Family Members,” University of Birmingham School of Law, October 2008, <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/300/> (accessed December 5, 2025).

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Dalahai, magistrate, Appeals court, Maroua, December 11, 2024; online correspondence with a Supreme Court justice of Cameroon, September 29, 2025; see also: Joseph Nzalé Ebi, “The Structure of Succession Law in Cameroon: Finding A Balance Between the Needs and Interests of Different Family Members,” University of Birmingham School

women and NGO representatives that Human Rights Watch interviewed expressed confusion about what community of property means during divorce and for a surviving spouse.

A magistrate in Maroua appeals court explained that the outcomes for women are different based on whether succession and division of property is handled through customary, judicial, or religious routes.¹²⁹ She said under the civil law regime, the wife inherits nothing when her husband dies. But if they have community of property (“communaute commun”), the widow or widows are entitled to half of the matrimonial property, and the other half is shared among the children of the deceased. But for customary marriages, distribution of property is determined based on traditional practices, which can be discriminatory to women.

According to an imam in Maroua, who is also a third-class traditional chief, people shop around for the best option between customary, religious, and statutory avenues.¹³⁰ “I work with other religious leaders, and we refer to the verses of the Koran. If it is beyond [our capacity to resolve a property division], we refer to the Lamido [who can be a first- or second-class traditional chief of the area],” he said. “Individuals who have the means will disregard our decision and take the matter directly to the Lamido or the authorities. For example, a rich man wanted to inherit all his father’s estate. He wasn’t happy with our decision. He went to the government to intervene and got the widow removed from the home.”¹³¹

In the imam’s view, differences in the religions across the country’s regions is not the main issue when it concerns inheritance. Instead, he said, the patriarchal culture and power systems based in patriarchy are the main problem reinforcing the exclusion of women from land and property, and this cuts across Muslim and Christian families. He explained that the marginalization of women also comes about due to greed, with brothers justifying

of Law, October 2008, <https://theses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/300/> (accessed December 5, 2025); and Civil Status Registration, Ordinance No. 81 – 02 of June 29, 1981, art. 77(2): “In the event of death of the husband, his heirs shall have no right over the widow, nor over her freedom or the share of property belonging to her.”

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Dalahai, magistrate, Appeals court, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹³⁰ According to Presidential decree No. 77/245 of July 15, 1977, organising Chieftaincy in Cameroon, there are three categories of chiefs, first, second, and third class, hierarchically based on their jurisdiction and authority. Third class chiefs exercise traditional authority over their village of origin only and are under the authority of second class chiefs who manage no more than three third class chiefs. First class chiefs are at the top of the hierarchy and manage no more than two second class chiefs.

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammadou Bachirou, 3rd level chief, Maroua zeme, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

excluding their sisters from inheriting because they are married or excluding a widow because they believe they have more rights to the property that she does. He said it is worse for widows who do not have children with their deceased husband.

Another imam said that in his experience, about 95 percent of unions in the Far North do not have a marriage certificate and most people are not interested in getting one, except government employees who need it for social security benefits and for promotions. He said most imams follow the sacred texts and guide the family toward an agreement. “But later some will have problems. Usually, the oldest son who is made the administrator of the estate takes everything without consulting the sisters. But it is not Islam that marginalizes the women, it’s society, the community that doesn’t apply the text of Islam as they should.”¹³²

Lack of Recourse, Support, and Services for Women Facing Abuses

Women interviewed for this report, who were facing economic or physical violence, described the government as having limited or no capacity or willingness to provide support to them. They had often sought recourse, going to multiple government agencies to seek help, including the local administrative offices of the Ministry of Women’s Economic Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF), the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), the police, and the courts. Instead of receiving assistance, their experiences were often of their problems being trivialized, or of being advised or pressured to abandon the matter without any remedy.

The government has taken some limited steps to improve services. MINPROFF has partnered with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women to establish survivor support services including call centers, safe spaces in Women and Family Empowerment Centers, and gender desks in police stations that are supposed to provide reception, counseling, and accommodation for women and girl survivors of violence.¹³³ In 2023, UNFPA mapped 23 safe spaces run in partnership with local non-governmental

¹³² Human Rights Watch interview with imam Abubaka Djama’a, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹³³ Republic of Cameroon and United Nations (UN), “National Strategy to Combat Gender Based Violence 2022-2026,” <https://minproff.cm/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/NATIONAL-STRATEGIY-TO-COMBAT-GBV.pdf>, p. 40.

organizations (NGOs) and two in partnership with MINPROFF in the Far North region.¹³⁴ In a 2024 report on Cameroon, it stated that 28 gender and child desks had been set up with 20 in police commissariats and eight in gendarmeries across the country.¹³⁵

However, a 2020 government and UN Women situational analysis found that gender focal points were often ineffective due to unsuitable appointments, frequent staff transfers, and limited understanding of their roles and responsibilities.¹³⁶ Women's access to support services remains limited nationwide, particularly outside the capital.

The government is relying heavily on international partners and local NGOs to provide victim and survivor support services. MINPROFF has one of the smallest budgets (two percent of the overall government budget), despite presidential and policy directives to ensure gender-sensitive budgeting, suggesting the government is not planning major steps to eradicate violence against women.¹³⁷

Poorly Trained and Resourced, and Concerns of Police Corruption

The police should always be available as an entry point for women in situations of violence to obtain safety, justice, and reparations, and the government has an obligation to ensure that women are protected against discrimination committed by the police, public authorities, and the judiciary. In reality, however, most police officers are poorly trained and inept at handling domestic violence issues, with police stations inadequately designed to provide any degree of privacy for handling such sensitive issues. Worse, many share the discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls, held all too often by public officials, including members of the judiciary, all contributing to a perpetuation of and further violations of women's rights. In most cases, government officials failed to act with due diligence to prevent violations of rights, including the right to life and physical

¹³⁴ UNFPA, "Cartographie des Espaces sûrs à l'usage des femmes et des filles fonctionnels dans la région de l'Extrême-Nord, Cameroun," April 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cartographie-des-espaces-surs-lusage-des-femmes-et-des-filles-fonctionnels-dans-la-region-de-lextreme-nord-cameroun-avril-2023> (accessed November 3, 2025).

¹³⁵ MINPROFF, "Evaluation de la Mise en Oeuvre de la Declaration et du Programme d'Action de Beijing (2019 – 2024)," October 2024, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/bo_report_cameroon_fr.pdf, p. 11 (accessed November 3, 2025).

¹³⁶ MINPROFF, "Cameroon: Profil Genre-Pays," February 27, 2021, <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/cameroon-gender-equality-profile>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.; and National Institute of Statistics (Cameroon) and MINPROFF, "2024 Factbook: Women and Men, Girls and Boys in Cameroon," https://ins-cameroun.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Factbook_Cameroon_EN_2025_01_17.pdf, p. 10.

integrity, or to investigate and punish acts of violence, and provide reparations to victims and survivors.

Yvonne D., a 54-year-old data processor in Douala, described how seeking help from the police only worsened the abuses she faced. She said,

I was appointed agency manager in my company and was given a company vehicle and driver since I had to work late most days. My husband had a job in fisheries. He resented my coming home late and began verbally abusing me. Every time I came home late, he would threaten the company driver and insult me, calling me a prostitute. He said I must stop working. When I refused, he went to my workplace with our marriage certificate and told my Director General that he doesn't want me to work there anymore and he must fire me. The DG said he would need a reason to fire me, so I didn't [drag] him to Labor [Ministry of Labour and Social Security, responsible for labor-related matters] for wrongful termination.

Over time, my husband became increasingly violent. My family intervened; he would stop for a month and then start again. I went to the police station, thinking they would summon him. Instead, the policeman listened, did not take notes, smiled, and just said 'Vraiment! Les femmes!' [Truly! Women!] When I returned home and my husband found out I had gone to the police, he beat me severely in front of our children and threw me out of our home.¹³⁸

She said the policeman's reaction—blaming her for her husband's behavior—and his nonchalance deeply wounded her, making her feel that her pain and suffering were trivialized.

Problematic responses from police and other specialized agencies to domestic violence remain common, including failure to inform survivors of their rights, dismissive behavior, and reliance on promises by the abuser to reform or family mediation that pressures women to reconcile with their abusers instead of ensuring legal protection.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Yvonne D., Douala, December 5, 2024.

Rosalind E., a 44-year-old hairdresser who lives in Buea with her three children, described how her husband assaulted her physically and sexually, seized her cellphone which she needed for her business, and chased her and her children out of their home with an axe.¹³⁹ She sought help from multiple government agencies in 2023 but said, “I was told to persevere [in preserving my marriage] for my children by family, social welfare, and police.” When she went to the police to report the situation, a female commissioner advised her “to drop it because it is a family matter.” She insisted that the police address the matter. The commissioner summoned her husband, but he refused to appear, and she issued a bench warrant for his arrest. After he was arrested, his family came after her. “They put my picture up on Facebook, said humiliating things about me online and sent me abusive messages.” The state prosecutor advised her to drop the case since her husband was not willing to cooperate even by giving the keys of the house to the police so she could get her belongings out of the house. She stayed at a safe house operated by an NGO for four months, lived with friends for some time, and now rents a room in Buea.¹⁴⁰

An official at the MINPROFF regional office in Douala, explained that the ministry’s officials mediate when it is reasonable and “advise women to report [abuse to the police] when it’s bad,” the official said, “People say they will fix it in the family. We can only help when the person reports to the police. If the person involved doesn’t want to act, we can’t do anything.”¹⁴¹

Some women choose not to report abuse, fearing inaction due to the abuser’s connections with the police or retaliation if they speak out. Francoise M., a 52-year-old teacher in Douala, who is in a polygamous marriage with three children, explained some of the social pressures and how they influenced her decision not to report her husband’s violence throughout their long and abusive marriage.¹⁴² “Violence is something women are expected to endure,” she said, describing economic, verbal, psychological, and physical abuse she endured for years.¹⁴³ She was a teacher on a 40,000 FCFA (\$71) monthly salary and was responsible for all household expenses, though her husband made more money than her. She said he threatened her life several times while they lived together and

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Rosalind E., Buea, December 17, 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024.

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Francoise M., Douala, December 4, 2024.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

publicly humiliated her. “Despite fearing for my life, I could not file a complaint because my husband has close connections with some local police commissioners. He would face no consequence, and I would be in more danger,” she added.¹⁴⁴ He moved in with another woman 11 years ago and has not provided any support for their three children since.

Several women Human Rights Watch interviewed said police indifference towards domestic violence has promoted a lack of confidence in this institution, fostering a complex social and cultural phenomenon of “*non-denonciation*” or “not reporting” in English. This term refers to situations where individuals refrain from reporting crimes, unethical behavior or other harmful acts they experience, witness or become aware of, to the authorities.

The official from MINPROFF Littoral regional delegation in Douala, said that the collaboration between MINPROFF and other government agencies, especially the police, is not effective and this impedes their ability to help survivors:

The commissariats are not reactive. We have focal points in the police stations. If we have a case of physical violence, I can call the police in her area to intervene. But then it’s up to the police to react... Most times the police say they don’t have petrol. Even with us they ask for money to go out in the field. They have service vehicles, we don’t. They have the provisions to act, we don’t. They ask us to motivate them [offer incentives, which could be read as a demand for a bribe] for the file to be pushed since the process is slow. They keep giving rendezvous [meetings] repeatedly. If you put money in front, the case moves quickly. Other agencies don’t prioritize these issues.¹⁴⁵

A senior official of the South West regional delegation of MINPROFF in Buea, expressed similar sentiments. The official said, “Partnerships between government agencies devolves into tense interactions. The people in law enforcement and the judiciary stifle our attempts to hold perpetrators accountable.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024.

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with a senior official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

In Maroua, an official of the Far North regional delegation of MINPROFF, said the agency works with a network of NGOs to train the police and hospital staff and try to ensure they have a focal point or “gender desk.” But training government employees is a challenge, with frequent government employee transfers and relocation to other ministries or geographic areas, and reliance on partners for funding. “We used to have trainings every six months, now we have it just once a year,” the government official said.¹⁴⁷

Several women across the three regions said they did not report or pursue their complaint at the police or in court due to their fear of repercussions, retaliation from the perpetrator, or other negative consequences such as social ostracization for them, their children, or their relatives. Cameroon also lacks mechanisms to detect and address cases of femicide risk requiring urgent protection. Lack of trust in authorities and the perception that authorities are ineffective or unresponsive to reports play a major role in an individual’s hesitation to speak out.

Limited Access to Information

Public outreach on women’s rights including domestic violence is inadequate and there are particular gaps in awareness-raising as it relates to economic violence, particularly for rural populations. Lack of publicly available information negatively impacts women’s ability to successfully navigate the bureaucracy, and more so during a traumatic time. Women said that they mainly learn about their rights and where to seek help in cases of domestic violence through word-of-mouth, often via friends or relatives referring them to NGOs or the local MINPROFF office.

Dalahai, a magistrate in the appeals court in Maroua, said,

The Ministry of Justice should conduct awareness raising regarding accessing the court, procedures and timelines, and mechanisms such as legal aid, which is free. A major barrier to accessing legal aid is the lack of information, as most courts have neither designated staff nor signage to guide survivors to the legal aid secretariat. The courts have to make available as much information as possible so that women know why court processes are slow sometimes. For example, has the other party been

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

informed? Sometimes judicial staff just say come tomorrow or next week without giving the correct or full information.¹⁴⁸

The official from the MINPROFF Littoral regional delegation in Douala, said most people have a poor understanding of what the ministry does.¹⁴⁹ “The population is not informed of our mission. They expect financial help and punishment for the abuser. Instead, we tell them that we work in conjunction with security and justice and can refer them to these agencies,” the official said. The government official acknowledged that the ministry could do better at raising awareness about its role, “we have a problem of communication.”¹⁵⁰

Public awareness materials, such as signs or banners on domestic violence, and information about the rights of victims and available support, are rarely seen in public spaces. Even the offices responsible for assisting victims can be difficult to locate. For example, the Regional Delegation of Social Affairs in Buea, South West, a government office, had no exterior signs to help people identify their premises. A high court in Maroua that Human Rights Watch researchers visited had no information desk or signs within its grounds to direct users on where to go for the help they needed.

This communication gap is worsened when under-resourced, poorly trained, or negligent frontline responders fail to inform women of their rights, including to legal aid and other assistance. Women said that having gathered the courage to get help and seek redress, the lack of clarity and assistance made it difficult for them to navigate these offices and their complex processes, discouraging some from proceeding.

Women Given the Runaround at Public Institutions

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has emphasized that inherent in the obligation to prevent gender based violence is the requirement to “an effective and accessible legal and legal services framework in place to address all forms of gender-based violence against women” and that when public authorities’ failure, negligence, or omission contributes to violence against women, there must be an effective

¹⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Dalahai, magistrate, Appeals court, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

system for investigating, prosecuting, and applying appropriate legal or disciplinary sanctions, as well as providing reparations.¹⁵¹

Yet women in Cameroon described how public officials sometimes use government bureaucracy to create barriers for women. Women described being turned away and shuffled from one agency to another, including at the regional and sub-divisional offices of the Ministry of Women’s Economic Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF), the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), the police, and the courts.

MINAS and MINPROFF provide assistance to target populations, including children, people with disabilities, older persons, and women and their families that officials deem “vulnerable.” However, these ministries receive some of the lowest government budget allocations.¹⁵² An official at the MINAS regional delegation in Maroua, explained that it might seem that the ministry is making it overly complicated for women to access services, but that problem arises from funding structure. “During the decentralization process, some of MINAS’ resources were shifted to the municipal councils. We refer some cases to the council, but it is difficult to work with some mayors. Some don’t think they should take care of these vulnerable people. It takes time when you go to the council.”¹⁵³

The women that Human Rights Watch interviewed described how their efforts to get help left them feeling frustrated, humiliated, insecure, and powerless in terms of safety and ownership over property or land. Fanne R., a 20-year-old woman in Maroua said, “At this point, all I wish is that he stops beating me and takes care of our family.”¹⁵⁴ They all talked about experiencing serious mental health challenges including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety. None of the survivors interviewed by Human Rights Watch received psychological support from public health services. Those who did obtain such assistance accessed it through counseling provided by NGOs.

¹⁵¹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 35: Gender-based Violence against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19 (1992), U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/35 (2017), paras. 22–23.

¹⁵² Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, “Citizen Budget 2026: Budget Transparency at the Service of Citizens,” https://www.dgb.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/CITIZEN-BUDGET-2026_-ENGLISH-VERSION.pdf, pp. 39 and 51; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon, “Citizen Budget 2025: Budget Transparency at the Service of Citizens,” <https://rfp.cm/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/MINFI%E2%80%A2BUDGET-CITOYEN-2025-Tout-public-Version-Anglaise-311224.pdf>, pp. 32 and 42.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINAS, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Fanne R., Maroua, December 10, 2024.

Several women said the absence of effective protective mechanisms, including safe shelters, combined with pressures from families to remain in abusive relationships due to cultural norms that discourage divorce, mean they must stay in these abusive situations even when they want to exit. Michelle M., a 37-year-old woman in Buea, who is married with four children said, “There’s nowhere to go.”¹⁵⁵ Agnes M., a 47-year-old woman in Buea who has been in a consensual union for 19 years said, “If I was certain that my husband would pay child support, I would consider leaving the marriage [union].”¹⁵⁶ When they sought protection from state and traditional authorities, they were villainized for reporting their husbands or given the runaround, with no action taken against the perpetrator. Both state and traditional authorities are inadequately trained to provide counseling regarding violence against women.

Several women said that even when they got an order from the court or a decision from Social Affairs requiring their partner to pay child support, their partners violated these orders with no consequences, even though in theory the men had committed offences under the penal code by denying the women their entitled resources.¹⁵⁷ Rosalind E., a 44-year-old hairdresser in Buea, who is separated from husband and lives with their three children, said:

The men can’t be pursued easily through legal means. Social Welfare can only appeal to the good heart or lean on the sentiments of the father. It is still up to him to choose whether to support our children or not. When a man chooses not to, women can’t do anything without connections of powerful people or money. Women do not get any support when pursuing cases of violence through government or legal entities.¹⁵⁸

The justice system remains inaccessible to many women, with divorce procedures costly and legal aid inadequate. This means that for some women, the abuse continues even after the ‘official’ end of the abusive relationship.

¹⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Michelle M., Buea, December 17, 2024.

¹⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Agnes M., Buea, December 17, 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Penal Code, art. 180 – Maintenance.

¹⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Rosalind E., Buea, December 17, 2024.

Women said judicial officers do not take their issues as seriously as they do when it is a man bringing a case. For example, Aishatou D., a 42-year-old woman in Maroua, sold cold water and ice and saved up enough money to buy a piece of land worth 900,000 FCFA (\$1,602). She paid a deposit of 442,000 FCFA (\$787). The seller took her money but sold the land to someone else. She went to the police, and the seller was arrested and released on bail. She has paid all court fees and for over two years she has been going to court to find out information about her case but receives very little information. She said:

Justice is slow and [the officials] always want you to give them [a bribe]. When my husband goes to court, he gets a lot of information and things start moving, but when it's me, they take their time. We are not equal in the justice system. When a man starts a case, they take it seriously compared to when it's a woman. For a woman, they turn you around, ask for this and that, take from you, as you to wait, and nothing happens. It's a waste of time and discourages women from reporting.¹⁵⁹

Inadequate Access to Justice, Challenges to Accessing Legal Aid

Women seeking legal aid they are entitled to for any dispute, including divorce, division of property, inheritance, etc., face numerous barriers to accessing it, including lack of information and officials who are unclear about the legal provisions and services that exist for victims; officials who make unreasonable demands on survivors to demonstrate eligibility; and lack of funding for legal aid and oversight deficiencies that result in inefficiencies and procedural hurdles.

The 2009 legal aid law provides that assistance should be made available to people whose resources are inadequate to have their rights enforced by a court or to follow up the enforcement of any writ or process of execution previously obtained without such legal aid.¹⁶⁰ It grants full or partial exemption from court or legal fees, including legal representation, to eligible persons, including spouses with minor children engaged in divorce proceedings and without a source of income to obtain maintenance for themselves

¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aishatou D., Maroua, December 12, 2024.

¹⁶⁰ Law No. 2009/004 of 14 April 2009 on the Organization of Legal Aid in Cameroon.

and the children left in their care, and unemployed and destitute women with minor children abandoned by their spouses and without resources.¹⁶¹

The law outlines conditions for obtaining legal aid. Applicants for legal aid are required to submit:

- a) an extract from the tax roll showing their assessments, or a certificate of non-assessment, or alternatively a certificate from the head of the administrative district specifying, where applicable, whether they are subject to the flat-rate tax; and
- b) a certificate of indigence issued by the Mayor, following an investigation conducted by the competent social services.

The process established by law seems straightforward, and the legal aid commissions responsible for administering legal aid systems, are required by law to issue a decision as quickly as possible, considering the urgency of the matter, and no later than 30 days after receiving the application.¹⁶² However, the bureaucracies of administrative and legal services create a cumbersome process, susceptible to corruption, with extensive delays.

Some government officials also lack adequate information and are sometimes unclear about the legal provisions and social services that exist to support victims and survivors of violence. For example, a magistrate said the awarding of legal aid depends on how complicated the case is and how much you are requesting. She also said that the law requires that a complainant in a case regarding property must pay 10 percent of the value of the property for their case to be put on the docket, before they can be considered for legal aid.¹⁶³ Stamp duty, a mandatory tax and sometimes calculated as a percentage of the value of property or assets, applies to all documents submitted in court, such as summons, pleadings, affidavits, court orders, and judgements (based on the amount of the sentence), independently of registration fees, and non-payment can result in severe penalties,

¹⁶¹ Law N° 2009/004 of 14 April 2009 on the Organization of Legal Aid in Cameroon, arts. 4 and 32 – 35; and Law N° 2009/004 of 14 April 2009 on the Organization of Legal Aid in Cameroon, art. 5(2)(d), "the spouse with custody of minor children, in the process of divorce who has no income of their own;" and art. 6(b), "the person without employment and without resources, abandoned by their spouse, for the purpose of obtaining from the court a maintenance payment for themselves or for the children left in their care."

¹⁶² Law N° 2009/004 of 14 April 2009 on the Organization of Legal Aid in Cameroon, arts. 19(1) and 22.

¹⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with Dalahai, magistrate, Appeals court, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

including imprisonment, fines, and the halting of court processes.¹⁶⁴ However, a complainant who is awarded legal aid is not required to pay any government taxes or fees, including court fees and stamp duty.¹⁶⁵ Women must also fulfil unreasonable requirements to demonstrate their eligibility (described in Women Given the Runaround in Public Institutions).

Lack of funding and oversight deficiencies result in inefficiencies and procedural hurdles that hinder effective implementation of the legal aid scheme.¹⁶⁶ Inadequate resources to organize and maintain the commissions and manage the cases for judicial assistance make its processes cumbersome and slow, playing a huge role in its inefficiency. Moreover, compiling the documents demanded by the commission from the applicant is burdensome, involving interaction with multiple government agencies that have limited material and human resources to support applicants through the process.

According to the few women who had benefited from legal aid that Human Rights Watch interviewed, the sentiments of individuals on the legal aid commissions and other subjective factors influenced if and how legal aid was granted, which could result in inconsistencies in its application. In a reported case, a woman applied for legal aid to obtain legal representation in 2012 but received no response from the commission in charge of her jurisdiction after more than six years.¹⁶⁷ The legal aid commission's structure and lack of independent oversight allow for selective disregard of applications, particularly where, as in this case, the woman's claim involved an advocate and a magistrate with potential influence over the commission's decision.

Staff from four NGOs assisting victims and survivors told Human Rights Watch that applicants for legal aid often face excessive and unreasonable requirements to prove that their financial situation makes them eligible. Two interviewees who were aware that the

¹⁶⁴ Republic of Cameroon, The General Tax Code, 2023, Part VI. Registration, Stamp Duty and Trusteeship, sections 264 – 272, 280 – 286, <https://www.impots.cm/en/actualites/general-tax-code-edited-1st-january-2023> (accessed February, 12, 2026).

¹⁶⁵ Law N° 2009/004 of 14 April 2009 on the Organization of Legal Aid in Cameroon, arts. 4 and 32–35.

¹⁶⁶ Nana Charles Nguindip, “Smearing the trundles of legal aid in Cameroon: reconsidering the need in appraising the legal framework,” *Dixi* vol. 27(2) (2025): 1, 10.16925/2357-5891.2025.02.06.

¹⁶⁷ See: *Mrs. Bate Nkongho Regina Manyo v. Bate Oscar* (Suit No. HCK/AB/40/2011, Unreported), the plaintiff applied for legal aid on 23 March 2012 due to lack of funds to hire a lawyer and the cost of proceedings. See: Tchana Anthony Nzouedja, “Access to Justice and Human Rights Protection in the Common Law Jurisdiction in Cameroon: Problems and Prospects, Texas Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies,” vol 2(2021): 39 and 42, <https://zienjournals.com/index.php/tjm/article/download/177/134/214> (accessed November 6, 2025).

law provides for legal aid and attempted to access this resource both described being required to obtain numerous documents from multiple government offices certifying that they were poor and were eligible for the assistance. Ironically, proving that they were poor also cost them a significant amount of money. Both said the process took an extensive period and could have taken years if they did not have the means to bribe officials to expedite the process. They also needed to provide a monetary incentive to cover transportation costs of members of the commission that decided on awarding legal aid.

Legal aid is not state charity; it is a fundamental mechanism to ensure that people can exercise their right to access justice when facing legal challenges. The government needs to do more to raise awareness of this mechanism, resource the commissions to ensure expedient decision making, and enhance oversight over the commission and the process.

Poorly Resourced Government Institutions

The systemic failure of state institutions to ensure victims and survivors are protected and can access services and justice is due to the government underfunding and under-resourcing public services, particularly legal and social security systems.

The main ministries focused on providing services for people in need—MINPROFF and MINAS, including their local agencies—do not have the necessary resources to provide individual support and close follow-up on cases of violence against women. An official from the Far North Regional Delegation of Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) in Maroua explained that, due to limited resources, they prioritize children and trafficking victims.¹⁶⁸ They intervene if a child is at risk, but not in cases of violence against women unless trafficking is involved.

This was confirmed by a senior official of the Littoral regional delegation for MINAS in Douala, and a MINAS focal point person in one of the commissariats in Douala.¹⁶⁹ The MINAS focal person said, “MINAS will get involved if physical, verbal, psychological abuse, and deprivation of support for provisions impacts a minor. But because of inadequate resources we provide services based on what is there, and not what is needed.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINAS, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with a focal point person, the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINAS, Douala, December 6, 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

The official in Maroua said the MINAS regional delegation of the Far North has 20 centers across 27 sub-divisions with only six divisional delegates, meaning heads of local or divisional ministry offices. “The centers have no resources to support travelling to all these sub-divisions. It is a challenge,” the official said. “Delegates should have motorcycles, at the least, but they don’t. They buy it themselves or a partner organization helps to get them around to do their work.”¹⁷¹

Four officials of the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Promotion of the Family (MINPROFF) said that they had limited resources to support women experiencing domestic violence and relied heavily on civil society organizations to fill this gap.¹⁷² An official of one of the municipal delegations in Douala said the ministry has an ongoing campaign to raise awareness. It also conducts listening sessions, registers cases, and provides documentation to assist survivors. However, it lacks the resources to provide most women facing domestic violence with psychosocial, health, economic, and legal support. She believes the delegation needs a consistent budget and an adequate number of trained personnel to ensure they can provide these important services.¹⁷³

In the South West, the insecurity caused by clashes between armed groups and government security forces has resulted in loss of houses and mass displacement to major cities, including Buea. A senior official of the South West regional delegation of MINPROFF in Buea said:

We can’t accompany victims or survivors. We can’t train every woman who needs training because we lack the financial and material resources. We have little or no allocation for emergencies in our budget. I talked with the minister; she insisted that we work with partners. But some partners are not responsive, while some have been suspended by the Ministry of Territorial Administration.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINAS, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁷² Human Rights Watch interviews with an official of one of the municipal delegations of MINPROFF, Douala, December 5, 2024; an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024; and two officials of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

¹⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of one of the municipal delegations of MINPROFF, Douala, December 5, 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with a senior official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

In 2021, Cameroonian authorities suspended the activities of Doctors Without Borders (MSF), which had been providing free emergency medical care and ambulance services in the North West Region since 2018.¹⁷⁵ This caused MSF to withdraw its medical teams from the North West and subsequently from the South West region.¹⁷⁶ In December 2024, the Minister of Territorial Administration banned and suspended the activities of four NGOs for three months, including one that runs a women’s shelter in Buea, citing “illicit and exorbitant funding that does not match the profile of the activity,” a “lack of authorization,” “activities likely to undermine the integrity of the national financial system,” and a “lack of justification for the use of the funding received.”¹⁷⁷ At the time of publication, some of these NGOs are still banned and the activities of some are still suspended pending the government’s investigations.¹⁷⁸

Speaking to Human Rights Watch in December 2024, an official from the Littoral regional delegation of MINPROFF in Douala explained:

Government inspectors of social work are trained in ENAM [National School of Administration and Magistracy]. But the government stopped training social workers about 15 to 20 years ago. The last graduating class was about 2009—these people are getting old, some are retiring. They are starting new recruits now. In the meantime, the government has been sending teachers to do the job; they don’t have the required skill or training to provide the services needed. Their response to clients is that ‘It’s your

¹⁷⁵ Doctors Without Borders (MSF), “People in North West seek healthcare as MSF denied providing medical services,” June 22, 2021, <https://www.msf.org/msf-denied-providing-badly-needed-healthcare-northwest-cameroon>

¹⁷⁶ MSF, “Doctors Without Borders forced to withdraw medical teams from North-West Cameroon,” August 3, 2021, <https://www.msf.org/doctors-without-borders-forced-withdraw-medical-teams-north-west-cameroon> (accessed April 26, 2026); MSF, “Cameroon: MSF Suspends Activities in Southwest due to unjust detention of four staff members” April 5, 2022, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/cameroon-msf-suspends-activities-southwest-due-unjust-detention-four-staff-members> (accessed April 26, 2026)

¹⁷⁷ Cameroon: Minister Suspends Prominent Human Rights Group, Human Rights Watch News Release, December 17, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/17/cameroon-minister-suspends-prominent-human-rights-group>; Juliana Nnoko, “Cameroon Suspends NGOs. Harming Gender-Based Violence Survivors,” commentary, Human Rights Watch Dispatch, January 9, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/09/cameroon-suspends-ngos-harming-gender-based-violence-survivors>; and Amnesty International, “Authorities must stop harassment of human rights defender Alice Nkom and attacks on civil society organizations,” January 9, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/cameroon-human-rights-defender-alice-nkom/> (accessed April 26, 2026).

¹⁷⁸ Robert & Ethel Kennedy Human Rights Center, “Cameroon: Government Must End Intimidation of REDHAC and Kennedy Human Rights Laureate Maximilienne Ngo Mbe,” February 8, 2026, <https://kennedyhumanrights.org/our-voices/cameroon-government-must-end-intimidation-of-redhac-and-kennedy-human-rights-laureate-maximilienne-ngo-mbe/> (accessed April 26, 2026).

fault.’ They accuse the victim. Women leave and advise other women not to go there because they will blame them for their plight. We need to hire more social workers.

We need more safe spaces. We don’t have any functioning now. ... We used to work with another organization that provided temporary housing for survivors for 72 hours, but they closed, and we don’t have one now. If we had a shelter, women who don’t have families or who don’t want to stay with their families, can go there. It would give them the time to heal and reintegrate into the society.¹⁷⁹

However, the National School of Administration and Magistracy (Ecole Normale d’Administration et Magistrature, ENAM) had announced competitive entrance exams to recruit 15 new students into the Social Affairs Administration section of its Administrative and Financial Division in the 2021/2022 academic year.¹⁸⁰ Even so, the MINAS official in the Far North, said that, “ENAM trains the higher cadre but we need lower level staff.”¹⁸¹ In November 2025, the country’s first One-Stop Centre was inaugurated in Yaounde, the nation’s capital.¹⁸² The facility, which aims to provide comprehensive support to survivors, started as the AFIRI Center Safe Space, an initiative established with the support of UNFPA and Embassy of France in Cameroon. An agreement between the AFIRI One-Stop Centre and Jamot Hospital, a public hospital with a large psychiatry department in Yaounde, helped establish the center.¹⁸³ While welcome, the center is likely to be inadequate to address the comprehensive support needed by women all over the country.

Shelters that provide safe emergency accommodation, qualified counselling, and assistance in finding long-term accommodation are a vital component of responding to

¹⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024. The official did refer to a safe space that was under construction by the United Nations Population Fund at the time of the interview and came on line in 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Ministry of the Public Service and Administrative Reform, Order No. 005756/MINFOPRA/, June 11, 2021, <https://www.camexamen.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ENAM-2021-70-ADM-A-ANG.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2026).

¹⁸¹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINAS, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁸² UNFPA, “Un tournant dans la lutte contre les VBG: Le Cameroun inaugure son premier ‘One Stop Center,’” November 28, 2025, <https://cameroon.unfpa.org/fr/news/un-tournant-dans-la-lutte-contre-les-vbg-le-cameroun-inaugure-son-premier-%C2%AB-one-stop-center-%C2%BB>.

¹⁸³ UNFPA, “Situation Report: Cameroon Humanitarian Response, 1-30 November 2025,” November 2025, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20Cameroon%20Situation%20Report%20%20-%20November%202025%20-%20FA.pdf>

domestic violence, offering women safety, specialized support, and the freedom to recover and make decisions away from their abusers' control. There is no official statistic on the number of government-run and NGO-run domestic violence shelters in the country. MINPROFF government officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that the government has no functioning temporary housing or accommodation for survivors in Douala, Littoral, and Buea, South West.¹⁸⁴ An official at MINPROFF regional office in Buea said, "MINPROFF had a safe space in Buea, but it stopped functioning a while ago. There are two to three safe spaces run by NGOs."¹⁸⁵ This absence of government-run shelters represents a severe gap in protection services and reflects the broader systemic failure to address violence against women comprehensively.

A senior official at the MINPROFF regional office in Buea added that "We have a large space but it's not user-friendly, it lacks amenities to have women stay there overnight. The Women's Empowerment Center in Limbe has a safe space but it's outside of the town and the current insecurity makes it inaccessible."¹⁸⁶ In the Far North, two out of 25 safe spaces (crisis response centers) are run by the government, with one of the two operated jointly with UNFPA.¹⁸⁷

The MINPROFF official at the Littoral regional delegation in Douala said:

Over the last two to three years the Prime Minister's Office has been trying to impose a social emphasis across the government, even reflected in the national budget. But up until now it is more theory than practice. The GBV strategy is not being implemented. It's still in the theoretical phase while the government puts things in place. We know that it will take time but as we wait the cases of violence against women is increasing.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024; and a senior official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with a senior official of the South West Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Buea, December 18, 2024.

¹⁸⁷ UNFPA, "Cartographie des Espaces sûrs à l'usage des Femmes et des Filles Fonctionnels dans la Région de l'Extrême-Nord, Cameroun," April 30, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cartographie-des-espaces-surs-lusage-des-femmes-et-des-filles-fonctionnels-dans-la-region-de-lextreme-nord-cameroun-avril-2023> (accessed November 3, 2025).

¹⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Littoral Regional Delegation, MINPROFF, Douala, December 13, 2024.

The official from MINAS regional delegation in Maroua emphasized the need for the government to prioritize strengthening collaboration and coordination between MINAS, MINPROFF, Ministry of Health, national security, and Ministry of Justice. “If instructions come from Yaounde, it will be implemented in the region,” the official said.¹⁸⁹

Faced with a lack of assistance and options, many women simply remain trapped indefinitely in abusive situations. Nganso K., a 52-year-old teacher in Douala, said when she got married, she was in grade 9. She said she stayed in an abusive marriage for over 18 years because she had nowhere to go, and her family pressured her against divorcing her husband.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with an official of the Far North Regional Delegation, MINAS, Maroua, December 11, 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Nganso K., Douala, December 4, 2024.

Cameroon's Human Rights Obligations

As the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) has underscored, a “women’s right to a life free from gender-based violence is indivisible from and interdependent on other human rights, including the rights to life, health, liberty and security of the person, equality and equal protection within the family, freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and freedom of expression, movement, participation, assembly and association.”¹⁹¹ And Cameroon is party to many treaties, including but not limited to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) that all articulate a state’s duty to protect those fundamental human rights that are commonly violated in domestic violence cases.¹⁹² These treaties also prohibit discrimination based on sex, or explicitly discrimination against women and girls, and under the constitution those treaties are automatically part of Cameroonian law and take precedence over national law.

¹⁹¹ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, *op. cit.*, para. 15.

¹⁹² Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted December 18, 1979, G.A. res. 34/180, 34 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 46) at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981, acceded to by Cameroon on August 23, 1994; Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted by the 2nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, Maputo, September 13, 2000, CAB/LEG/66.6, entered into force November 25, 2005, ratified by Cameroon December 28, 2012; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, acceded to by Cameroon on June 27, 1984; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, acceded to by Cameroon on June 27, 1984; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention against Torture), adopted December 10, 1984, G.A. res. 39/46, annex, 39 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 197, U.N. Doc. A/39/51 (1984), entered into force June 26, 1987, acceded to by Cameroon on December 19, 1986; Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. res. 44/25, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49, entered into force September 2, 1990, acceded to by Cameroon on January 11, 1993; Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted December 10, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A(III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 71 (1948); and the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), adopted June 26, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986, acceded to by Cameroon on September 18, 1989.

The CEDAW Committee has also underscored how “gender-based violence against women is one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated,” and repeatedly emphasized that “such violence is a critical obstacle to the achievement of substantive equality between women and men and to the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”¹⁹³

The Right to Nondiscrimination

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination as “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.”¹⁹⁴ States must not only refrain themselves from engaging in discrimination but the convention explicitly requires states to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization, or enterprise.¹⁹⁵

The Maputo Protocol provides a similar definition of discrimination describing it as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction or any differential treatment based on sex and whose objectives or effects compromise or destroy the recognition, enjoyment or the exercise by women, regardless of their marital status, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all spheres of life.”¹⁹⁶ It also provides what it terms as “special protection” for older women, women with disabilities, and widows, explicitly imposing on states undertakings to ensure they enjoy freedom from discrimination and from violence. Expanding that protection, Cameroon was among the original fifteen countries to ratify both recent Protocols to The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Older

¹⁹³ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, *op. cit.*, para. 10.

¹⁹⁴ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), entered into force September 3, 1981, ratified by Cameroon August 23, 1994 art. 1.

¹⁹⁵ CEDAW, *op. cit.*, art. 2 (e).

¹⁹⁶ Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), adopted by the 2nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, Maputo, July 11, 2003, entered into force November 25, 2005, ratified by Cameroon September 13, 2012, art. 1(j).

Persons in Africa¹⁹⁷ and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa¹⁹⁸ which require states to act to eliminate discrimination against older women and women with disabilities and put in place legislation and take other measures to protect their rights to property and inheritance.¹⁹⁹

Both CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol require states to modify or abolish discriminatory laws, regulations, customs, and practices.²⁰⁰ CEDAW provides that states should: “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women,” and “modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.”²⁰¹

Regarding marriage and family, CEDAW requires states to eliminate discrimination and ensure equality between men and women, including “(c) The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution; ... (h) The same rights for both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property....”²⁰² Likewise, the Maputo Protocol upholds the same, and provides that states should enact legislative measures guaranteeing that husbands and wives jointly decide on their place of residence.²⁰³

The CEDAW Committee notes that “[a]ny law or custom that grants men a right to a greater share of property at the end of a marriage or de facto relationship, or on the death of a relative, is discriminatory and will have a serious impact on a woman's practical ability to divorce her husband, to support herself or her family, and to live in dignity as an

¹⁹⁷ Protocol to The African Charter in Human and Peoples’ Rights on The Rights of Older Persons in Africa, ratified by Cameroon on June 6, 2022, entered into force on October 4, 2024, art. 9.

¹⁹⁸ Protocol to The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa, ratified by Cameroon on June 6, 2022, entered into force May 3, 2024, arts. 7 (2) (g), 27, 27 (j).

¹⁹⁹ Protocol on The Rights of Older Persons in Africa, *op. cit.*, art. 9.

²⁰⁰ CEDAW, arts. 2(f), and 5(a); and the Maputo Protocol, art. 2(2).

²⁰¹ CEDAW, arts.2(f) and 5(a).

²⁰² CEDAW, art. 16(c) and (h). The ICCPR also provides that governments must guarantee the equal rights of spouses as to marriage, during marriage, and at its dissolution. ICCPR, art. 23(4).

²⁰³ Maputo Protocol, art. 6(e).

independent person.”²⁰⁴ Similarly, the Maputo Protocol upholds the right of women and men to inherit equitable shares of their parents’ property, and a widow’s “right to an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband.”²⁰⁵ In Cameroon, practices concerning inheritance are mostly based on customs and religious edicts resulting in serious discrimination against wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters. Government institutions and officials are sometimes involved, intentionally or inadvertently, in facilitating the unequal inheritance between men and women, in violation of women’s rights to nondiscrimination and property. However, there is a persistence of entrenched discriminatory gender stereotypes regarding the role and responsibilities of women and men in the family, which perpetuates practices involving violence and coercion against women in the country. Cameroon’s current Civil Code entrenches these discriminatory gender stereotypes and continues to foster discrimination against women, and the government is delaying adoption of a bill that could eliminate the discriminatory provisions in the current law.

Both the ICCPR and the ICESCR require Cameroon to respect, protect and fulfill the rights in each covenant without discrimination. The respective treaty monitoring bodies have issued authoritative guidance on what is required of states to meet their obligations with respect to non-discrimination and to ensure equality that can help prevent or mitigate violence against women.

The Human Rights Committee, the body of experts that oversees compliance with the ICCPR, has issued guidance on equality of rights between men and women (general comment No. 28) and equality between spouses (general comment No. 19), among other things underscoring that states “must not only adopt measures of protection, but also positive measures in all areas so as to achieve the effective and equal empowerment of women;” that women must never be denied the capacity to own or inherit property, or be treated as the property of a husband; and that there is to be equality of rights and

²⁰⁴ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 21: Equality in Marriage and Family Relations), (1994), para. 28.

²⁰⁵ Maputo Protocol, art. 21.

responsibilities between spouses, during a marriage and at its dissolution. This equality extends to all matters arising from their relationship.²⁰⁶

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has issued two sets of guidance on equality in the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights (general comments No. 16 and 20), in which it emphasizes the need for substantive equality between women and men, and dismantling of the actual conditions and systemic barriers that prevent women from enjoying their rights.²⁰⁷ The committee has emphasized that states' obligations on equality with respect to marriage include women's equal rights to marital property and inheritance upon their husband's death, and how gender based violence inhibits the ability to enjoy economic, social, and cultural rights, on a basis of equality.²⁰⁸

The Right to Live Free of Violence

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has defined violence against women as a form of discrimination which seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men, and has underscored that "full implementation of the Convention requires states to take positive measures to eliminate all forms of violence against women."²⁰⁹

Violence against women is a particularly insidious form of discrimination against women and discrimination against women facilitates, exacerbates, sustains, and entrenches violence against them. Indeed, the obligation to eliminate violence against women is

²⁰⁶ Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 28 (Article 3: Equality of rights between men and women), CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.1, March 29, 2000, paras. 3 and 19; General Comment No. 19 (Article 23: Protection of the family, right to marriage, and equality of spouses), U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1 at 28 (1994), para. 6.

²⁰⁷ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 16, Article 3: the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights (Thirty-fourth session, 2005), U.N. Doc. E/C.12/2005/3 (2005); General comment No. 20: Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (art. 2, para. 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), E/C.12/GC/20, 2 July 2009,

²⁰⁸ See for example General Comment 16, para. 27.

²⁰⁹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 19: Violence Against Women, 11th Sess., U.N. Doc. A/47/38 (1993), para. 4; see also id. para. 7 ("Gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of article 1 of the Convention. These rights and freedoms include: (a) The right to life; (b) The right not to be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; (c) The right to equal protection according to humanitarian norms in time of international or internal armed conflict; (d) The right to liberty and security of person; (e) The right to equal protection under the law; (f) The right to equality in the family; (g) The right to the highest standard attainable of physical and mental health; (h) The right to just and favourable conditions of work").

considered to be an obligation of customary international law, that is binding on all states independent of any treaty obligations.²¹⁰

The CEDAW Committee has issued—in the form of General Recommendations—authoritative guidance to states on their obligations to address and prevent violence against women (no. 19) and gender-based violence respectively (no. 35), on the economic consequences of marriage, family relations and their dissolution (no. 29), and on equality in marriage and family relations (no.21). It has identified “gender-based violence against women as being rooted in gender-related factors, such as the ideology of men’s entitlement and privilege over women, social norms regarding masculinity, and the need to assert male control or power, enforce gender roles or prevent, discourage or punish what is considered to be unacceptable female behaviour.”²¹¹ This violence, linked to asserting male control, impacts women’s participation in households and community decisions, and in politics and public life, including reducing the ability of women to hold political positions by election or appointment.

The Maputo Protocol defines violence against women as “[a]ll acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life.”²¹² It highlights often-overlooked forms of violence such as verbal abuse, threats, psychological, and economic harm.²¹³

The Protocol on The Rights of Older Persons in Africa, obligates states to protect the rights of older women to be free from gender-based violence, while the Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa calls for protection both within and outside the home, from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse, and for women with disabilities to be protected from sexual- and gender-based violence.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, op. cit., para 2, endorsed by the European Court of Human Rights in *Volodina v Russia*, Application No. 41261/17, judgement July 9, 2019, para. 110.

²¹¹ CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 35, op. cit., para 19.

²¹² Maputo Protocol, art. 1(j).

²¹³ *Ibid.* art. 3(4).

²¹⁴ Protocol on The Rights of Older Persons in Africa, op. cit. art. 9; and the Protocol on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa, op. cit., art. 27 (j).

Due Diligence in Preventing Violence

The CEDAW Committee in General Recommendation No. 19 identified a “due diligence” standard for determining whether states have fulfilled obligations to ensure the elimination of violence against women.²¹⁵ The standard encompasses states’ due diligence in protecting the right to life, and in preventing torture and ill-treatment (right to be free from torture or degrading treatment or punishment), also from private persons, and in investigating and punishing acts of violence, and providing compensation. The Maputo Protocol also protects women’s rights to dignity, life, integrity, and security of person.²¹⁶ It obliges states to prevent, investigate, and punish violence against women, and to rehabilitate and compensate survivors, implying a due diligence obligation with respect to violence against women.²¹⁷

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has said that to ensure women enjoy their economic, social, and cultural rights on an equal basis with men, states “must take appropriate measures to eliminate violence against women and act with due diligence to prevent, investigate, mediate, punish and redress acts of violence by private actors.”²¹⁸

Protection of Survivors and Victims of Violence

In addition to acting to prevent violence, states must protect victims, survivors, and potential victims of violence.²¹⁹ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 emphasizes the importance of shelters or “refuges” and specifies that states should establish support services for victims of family violence, rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence, including refuges, specially trained health workers, rehabilitation, and counselling.²²⁰ General Recommendation No. 33 recognizes the financial constraints faced by many women victims of violence and calls on states to guarantee access to financial aid, crisis centres, shelters, hotlines and medical, psychosocial, and counselling services.²²¹

²¹⁵ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against women, 1992, para. 9.

²¹⁶ Maputo Protocol, arts. 3 and 4.

²¹⁷ Maputo Protocol, art. 4.

²¹⁸ CESCR General Comment No. 16 (2005) para. 27.

²¹⁹ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, *op. cit.*, para. 31(iii).

²²⁰ CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 *op. cit.*, paras. 24(k), (r(iii)), (t(iii)).

²²¹ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 33: Women’s Access to Justice, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/33 (2015), para. 16 (b).

CEDAW also requires states to take steps to guarantee that women are not subjected to undue delays in applications for protection orders and that all criminal acts of gender-based discrimination, particularly violence, are heard in a timely and impartial manner. Similarly, the Maputo Protocol provides that states parties shall establish mechanisms and accessible services for effective information, rehabilitation, and reparation for victims of violence against women.²²² Remedies should be effective, timely, and appropriate reparations should be available to survivors of gender-based violence.²²³ Remedies should include monetary compensation, the provision of legal, social, and comprehensive health services, such as sexual, reproductive, and mental health services, alongside measures that ensure satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, in line with CEDAW General Recommendation No. 28.²²⁴

²²² Maputo Protocol, art. 4(2)(f).

²²³ CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 33: Women's Access to Justice, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/33 (2015), para. 19.

²²⁴ CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 28: Core Obligations of States Parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/28 (2010), para. 32.

Recommendations

To the Government of Cameroon—The Presidency, The Prime Ministry, and Parliament:

To fulfill its obligations under international and regional human rights law, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, the government should:

- Draw on national and international expertise and guidance to draft and enact comprehensive laws to prohibit gender-based violence against women in the private and public spheres, addressing all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence—with a comprehensive definition of domestic violence, including physical, economic, and psychological violence; provide for protection, exclusion, and restraining orders, in line with CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol and monitoring of implementation.
- Introduce clear criminal and civil remedies for domestic violence in all its different dimensions.
- Prioritize harmonizing the bi-jural legal system, including revising the Code on Persons and the Family, to guarantee equal rights within the family and family relations, reduce inconsistencies between common law and civil law procedures, strengthen legal certainty, improve access to justice for all, and bring the legal system into full compliance with CEDAW, and other regional and international human rights standards.
 - Establish an inclusive law reform process—engaging legal practitioners, judges, academics, and civil society—to ensure that the unified code reflects best practices from both legal systems, eliminates all discriminatory provisions in the current Civil Code, and enhances fairness, efficiency, and coherence across the national legal system.
 - Advance the final draft to parliament for debate and enactment in a time-bound manner.
- Amend the Civil Code to establish community of property as the default marital property regime, regardless of the type of marriage. In marriages under community of property regime, all assets acquired during the marriage, regardless of name on the title or who acquired them, should be jointly owned.

- Upon divorce or judicial separation, all property and assets acquired during the marriage under community property should be equally distributed between spouses, irrespective of which spouse's name appears on ownership documents.
- Provisions on child support to the custodial parent should be effectively enforced, including through administrative agencies such as MINPROFF or pursuing legal action with automatic and expedited legal aid for women who need it, and should include methods such as automatic wage garnishment, asset seizures including seizing funds from non-paying parent's bank accounts and placing liens on property, and filing a contempt of court motion.
- Amend succession law to make clear upon intestate succession, the surviving spouse(s) should inherit in equal shares with the deceased spouse's children, regardless of the marital property regime in place during the marriage. This inheritance right should apply to both the deceased's portion of marital community property and to any individual property the deceased acquired or inherited during his or her lifetime.
- Withdraw the reservation to the Maputo Protocol to make all provisions of the treaty operative and have legal effect in Cameroon.

Executive Branch: The Presidency, Prime Ministry, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Promotion of the Family, Ministry of Social Affairs, and National Security

- Adopt a comprehensive, coordinated response to domestic violence by establishing strong inter-ministerial collaboration among key agencies—including MINPROFF, MINAS, Ministry of Health, National Security, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Finance. A unified framework would improve coordination, streamline referrals, and ensure survivors receive timely, effective support across all sectors.
- Ensure immediate risk assessment mechanisms and protection measures (e.g., restraining or eviction orders) without requiring victims to initiate legal action. Ensure that an assessment of the danger to the life of the victim, the seriousness of the situation including economic coercion or dependency on the aggressor, and the risk of repeated violence is carried out by all relevant

authorities at all stages of the investigation and the procedures under legislation against domestic violence. The assessment will aim to mitigate the risk and provide immediate protection and support to victims and their children and direct them to appropriate services.

- Expand access to social security beyond formal sector employment, including for women working in the informal economy, by strengthening existing and introducing additional schemes to ensure everyone's right to social security across the life course. This should include a progressive shift toward more inclusive, rights-aligned social security—such as universal programs for children, mothers, older persons, or caregivers—while reducing reliance on narrowly targeted approaches that can reinforce exclusion, stigma, and gender-based risks.
- Ensure that expanded coverage prioritizes individual entitlements rather than household-based eligibility, to strengthen women's economic autonomy and reduce dependence on partners, and establish clear timelines, financing strategies, and institutional responsibilities for expansion, with transparent public reporting on progress.

Resourcing

- Establish, fund, and operate survivor-centered services in all police stations, courts, MINAS and MINPROFF offices, and health centers.
- Allocate adequate budgetary resources, including adequate human, technical, and financial resources to fully support prevention, including women's economic autonomy programs, protection, and response mechanisms, and for the effective implementation of the national GBV strategy and to establish monitoring and assessment mechanisms for the implementation of all the gender-related national plans.
- Re-establish and adequately resource temporary shelters, safe houses, and 24-hour helplines, at a level sufficient to fully meet the need, including ensuring accessibility in rural and remote areas, including referrals to receive free medical care, information of their rights, psychosocial support, including counselling and rehabilitation services, and adequate legal counsel or representation.

- Provide full and barrier-free access to medical care, psychosocial support and counselling services, reintegration programs, and legal assistance for all victims and survivors of violence and their families.
- Create a national data system to collect and publish disaggregated statistics on gender-based violence cases, including prosecution and conviction rates.

Awareness Raising

- Address the stigma discouraging women, including older women, and girls who are victims of gender-based violence from reporting it, through awareness-raising campaigns on the criminal nature of all forms of such violence and its grave impact on women's enjoyment of their rights.
- Conduct nationwide awareness campaigns to convey that all forms of gender-based violence including domestic violence, comprising its psychological and economic forms, are a crime; to challenge gender stereotypes and emphasize the need for women to be able to report such cases to law enforcement authorities without fear of reprisals, stigmatization, or revictimization. This should include raising awareness of services provided by the different government agencies, including through informative signage and billboards in public areas such as police stations, courts, government offices, marketplaces, etc.

Training

- Provide mandatory training for law enforcement personnel, including police and gendarmes, on national protections that exist to prevent and protect women from violence, including training on gender stereotypes, and training on how to handle domestic violence cases to ensure victims' claims are investigated promptly and fully, that they are referred to hospital, if needed, and immediately, and connected to a victim/survivor agency to receive medical and psychosocial support, and their case is forwarded to the state prosecutor expeditiously to ensure they get the protection that they need, and ensure that perpetrators are investigated, prosecuted, and sanctioned. Provide police with specific expertise on risk assessment and risk management of domestic violence cases.
- Train and deploy more psychologists and social workers to staff ministries that handle gender-based violence on women and girls, including domestic violence.

- Provide continuous mandatory training to administrative personnel of MINPROFF, MINAS and other Ministries, on Cameroon's core human rights obligations related to right to life, to physical and moral integrity and to humane treatment in all circumstances, and to ensure that women victims of domestic violence, and especially mothers, and their children have access to effective remedies and immediate means of redress and protection.

The Ministry of Justice

- Revamp the legal aid commissions and ensure ongoing monitoring and accountability of how they are performing their tasks in accordance with the law. Simplify the process of applying for legal aid, including by eliminating onerous or excessively formal documentation requirements, eligibility criteria and processes for accessing legal aid for victims and survivors of violence, including physical, economic, psychological, and sexual violence.
 - Adequately resource legal secretariats to ensure that each has a dedicated staff and have the resources to convene commission meetings as needed.
- Ensure the timely, impartial, and effective investigation and prosecution of all cases of violence against women.
- Strengthen the capacity of the judicial system, including through additional financial, technical, and specialized human resources, so that cases can be handled in a timely, gender-sensitive, and non-discriminatory manner.
- Provide mandatory training for judges and lawyers, including prosecutors, on application of the national legal framework, and Cameroon's core human rights obligations related to gender-based violence including the Maputo Protocol, CEDAW and its Committee's jurisprudence and general recommendations, in particular general recommendations No. 19, No. 21, No. 28 on the core obligations of states parties under article 2 of CEDAW, No. 33, and No. 35. Provide prosecutors with specific expertise on risk assessment and risk management of domestic violence cases.
- Provide mandatory, recurrent gender-sensitive training, including training on gender stereotypes, for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and law enforcement officials and ensure that oversight bodies for these professions are responsive to complaints of gender bias and mistreatment of women.

- Establish judicial accountability mechanisms to monitor bias, delay, or inaction in gender-based violence cases, and to ensure impartial application of evidentiary rules, investigations, and other legal and quasi-judicial procedures, are not influenced by gender stereotypes or prejudice.

To Bilateral and Multilateral Partners and International Donors

- Support the government through financial and technical assistance to implement comprehensive gender-based violence laws and policies.
- Fund capacity-building initiatives for justice, health, and social service professionals on survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches.
- Support NGOs and community-based organizations providing shelters, legal aid, psychosocial support, and awareness campaigns.
- Promote research and data collection on the prevalence, causes, and impacts of gender-based violence, including among women age 50 and older.
- Encourage policy dialogue and monitoring to ensure Cameroon's compliance with its obligations under CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol.
- Support the expansion of inclusive, rights-aligned social security systems by prioritizing financing and technical assistance for universal programs, while ensuring that all supported programs systematically integrate gender-based violence risk assessment, mitigation, and referral mechanisms. This should include moving beyond narrowly targeted approaches toward rules-based and adequate entitlements; strengthening national ownership and budgetary commitment; and aligning social security with public services that enable women's economic autonomy and safe exit from violence.
- Urge the government to implement the recommendations above.

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“I Live in Constant Peril”

Discrimination, Lack of Economic Autonomy, and Violence Against Women in Cameroon

Since 2011, Cameroon’s government has made repeated public commitments to reduce violence against women and girls. Most recently, in 2022, it set a target of halving violence by 2026. It has comprehensively failed.

“I Live in Constant Peril” documents the widespread violence women in Cameroon face at the hands of husbands and intimate partners and the systemic failures that leave survivors without protection or justice. Women, often having endured physical, psychological and/or emotional violence, at the hands of their partners, then found that their husbands sold jointly acquired property without their consent or compensation, or sabotaged employment opportunities, cancelled business leases, and destroyed work equipment to cut off women’s income and independence. This economic violence was enabled by structural discrimination that allows men, including male relatives, to dispossess women of land and property despite legal documents, wills, or land certificates. Women who sought help from police or courts described being pressured by authorities to reconcile with their abusers or being blamed for the violence they experienced.

Discriminatory laws, entrenched gender inequality, and chronic underinvestment in prevention and survivor support all go to sustain the violence. The absence of a coordinated government response leaves police, courts, healthcare providers, and social workers ill-equipped to prevent abuse, protect survivors, or hold perpetrators accountable.

The government, in power for more than four decades, has failed to reform discriminatory family laws, and update and adopt a Family Code that has been in draft for about 20 years. It has no national policy on domestic violence. Government officials acknowledge that violence against women and girls is worsening.

Human Rights Watch calls on the government of Cameroon to urgently reform discriminatory laws, establish a coordinated national response to domestic violence, and ensure victims and survivors have meaningful access to justice, shelters, and legal aid.



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