Assessment of Effects of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Participation in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in NWSW Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper explores the effects of gender-based violence (GBV) on women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. In many conflict-affected areas, women face significant barriers that hinder their involvement in these critical processes, often rooted in the pervasive culture of violence and discrimination. In the conflict-affected areas of NWSW regions of Cameroon, most often, women and girls are considered legal minors and not invited to take part in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This paper makes use of qualitative research methods such as the library method, unstructured interviews, Focus Group Discussions and personal observations to bring forward the effects of this violence on vulnerable women and girls, and the effects of their absence from conflict resolution and peacebuilding tables. Mindful of the above, the paper explains the various types of violence, before going forward to critically analyse the role they can play in hindering conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The research also analyses case studies from various contexts and examines how GBV not only undermines women's safety and well-being but also diminishes their capacity to contribute effectively to peace initiatives. Additionally, there is a discussion on the role of grassroots organizations in empowering women and addressing GBV as a means to enhance their participation in conflict resolution. The paper reveals that experiences of violence can lead to psychological trauma, reduced social capital, and limited access to resources, all of which impede women's engagement in peacebuilding activities Finally, this study advocates for legal reforms and providing support services, underscores the necessity of integrating gender perspectives into peace processes, emphasizes that addressing GBV is essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable peace and calls for a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of gender equality, GBV prevention, and women's active participation in peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords: Effect, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Women's Participation, Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding.

1.0 Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive violation of human rights that significantly undermines the safety, dignity, and well-being of individuals, particularly women and girls[1]. Defined by the United Nations as "harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender," GBV encompasses a wide range of abuses, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence[2].

This violence can occur in various contexts-including within intimate relationships, families, communities, and during armed conflicts-making it a crucial barrier to achieving gender equality

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[1] Garcia-Moreno, C., Pallitto, C., Devries, K., Stöckl, H., & Watts, C. (2015). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence.* World Health Organization.

[2] United Nations. (n.d.). *Gender-based violence*. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/events/endviolenceday/what-is-gbv

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and sustainable peace[3]. The prevalence of GBV is often exacerbated in conflict settings, where societal structures break down, and vulnerability increases[4].

In conflict-affected areas of Cameroon, particularly the NWSW, the rates of GBV often escalate due to the breakdown of social structures, law enforcement, and protective mechanisms[5]. Armed conflicts can exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and create environments where violence against women is normalized[6]. Women and girls frequently face heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking, particularly in hinterlands of these regions where accountability is very lacking[7].

GBV not only occurs as a consequence of conflict but can also perpetuate further violence and instability. The trauma experienced by survivors can hinder their ability to participate in community rebuilding efforts, create societal divisions, and contribute to a cycle of violence that impedes peace processes[8]. Thus, addressing GBV is critical for effective conflict resolution and the establishment of lasting peace. Intentionally mindful of the milestone, this paper analyses the effect of GBV, especially of women and girls.

1.1 Physical Violence: An Overview and Its Forms

Physical violence is defined as any act that causes bodily harm or injury to another individual. It is a significant public health issue and a violation of human rights that affects individuals across all demographics. Understanding the various forms of physical violence is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies[9].

Intimate partner violence occurs between current or former partners and can encompass a range of abusive behaviors, including physical assaults, threats, and coercion. According to the World Health Organization[10], IPV is a leading cause of injury and death among women globally[11]. Victims may experience repeated cycles of violence, which can severely affect their mental and physical well-being.

The Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence is a cornerstone of the legal framework addressing IPV in Cameroon. This law defines gender-based violence broadly, including domestic violence, which encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse[12]. This law emphasizes that domestic violence can

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[3] International Rescue Committee. (2018). *The impact of gender-based violence on women in conflict settings*.

[5] Oxfam. (2021). *The impact of conflict on women and girls: A global overview*. P10
[6] Ibid

[8] UN Women. (2015). *The economic costs of violence against women*. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/11/economic-costs-of-violence-against-women
[9] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). *Preventing youth violence*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/fastfact.html Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2014)
[10] World Health Organization. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*.
[11] Ibid
[12] Cameroon. (2016). *Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*.

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occur between partners or former partners, thus explicitly recognizing IPV as a critical issue that needs to be addressed[13].

Additionally, the *Cameroon Penal Code* includes provisions related to violence within intimate relationships[14]. This law criminalizes acts of violence, highlighting that any form of physical assault against a partner is punishable under the law[15]. This legal framework establishes a basis for prosecuting perpetrators of IPV and protecting victims' rights.

Domestic violence refers to physical violence that occurs within a domestic setting, often involving family members or cohabitating partners. This form of violence can include not only physical assaults but also emotional abuse, financial control, and other harmful behaviors. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence[16] notes that domestic violence can occur in heterosexual and same-sex relationships and affects individuals of all backgrounds.

Sexual violence includes acts of physical violence that are sexual in nature, such as rape and sexual assault. These acts are often characterized by the use of force or coercion and can have long-lasting psychological and physical effects on survivors. The U.S. Department of Justice[17] reports that sexual violence is a pervasive issue, with a significant proportion of women experiencing sexual assault in their lifetimes. In the case of the Court of Appeal of Yaoundé18, the court addressed a situation involving sexual assault. The ruling highlighted the psychological and physical effects of sexual violence on survivors, acknowledging that such acts can lead to long-lasting trauma and mental health issues. This case illustrates the judiciary's recognition of the severe impact of sexual violence and the necessity for legal recourse for victims. Similarly, in another case in Limbe, the court dealt with a complaint of sexual harassment in the workplace. The ruling established legal precedent for interpreting sexual harassment as a form of sexual violence, recognizing its emotional and psychological impact on victims[19].

In conflict settings, child abuse manifests as physical violence inflicted on children, often through hitting, beating, or other forms of physical harm. The consequences of such abuse are particularly devastating in these environments, leading to profound and long-lasting impacts on a child's emotional and psychological development. Reports from humanitarian organizations indicate that millions of children in conflict zones experience abuse or neglect each year, with physical abuse being one of the most prevalent forms. The trauma endured during these formative years can hinder children's ability to heal and thrive, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability in their communities.[20]

1.1.2 Economic Violence

Economic violence, a form of gender-based violence (GBV), refers to actions that control or restrict an individual's access to economic resources, severely limiting their financial

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[13] Article 2 of Cameroon. (2016). *Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence.*

[14] *Cameroon Penal Code* 2016

[15] Specifically, *Articles 266 and 267 of the Cameroon Penal Code 2016*

[16] National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2020). *Domestic violence*. Retrieved from https://ncadv.org/statistics

[17] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Child maltreatment 2015*. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2015.pdf U.S. Department of Justice. (2017). *National crime victimization survey*

[18] *Judgment No. 12/2018 of the Court of Appeal of Yaoundé*

[19] IHRDA SGBV Database. (2020). *Case of Judgment No. 22/2020* of the Court of First Instance, Limbe.

[20] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Child maltreatment 2015*. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2015.pdf

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independence and ability to support themselves[21]. This type of violence can occur in various contexts, including intimate relationships, families, and broader societal structures. Understanding the forms of economic violence is essential for developing effective interventions and promoting financial empowerment for vulnerable populations.

One of the most common forms of economic violence is the deliberate withholding of financial resources. This can manifest as a partner refusing to provide money for basic necessities such as food, clothing, or healthcare. Such control can create a dependency that makes it difficult for the victim to leave an abusive relationship. According to Duvvury, Grown, and Cañete[22], financial control is a powerful tool used by abusers to maintain power and control over their partners.

Economic violence can also involve obstructing a person's access to employment opportunities. This may include forbidding a partner from working, sabotaging job opportunities, or exerting pressure to restrict the types of jobs one can pursue. This form of violence not only limits financial independence but can also lead to long-term economic[23].

In conflict zones, the exploitation of labor intensifies as individuals are often coerced into working under abusive conditions without fair compensation. This exploitation is prevalent in both formal and informal employment settings, with vulnerable populations—such as displaced persons, refugees, and those in low-wage jobs—being particularly at risk. In these unstable environments, the lack of bargaining power among these groups is frequently manipulated by employers, leading to severe economic violence. The dire circumstances created by conflict exacerbate their vulnerability, making it increasingly difficult for them to escape cycles of exploitation and abuse[24].

Coercive control over shared or personal assets is another form of economic violence. This can involve a partner controlling bank accounts, property, or other financial resources, limiting the victim's ability to make independent financial decisions. Such control can create a cycle of dependency, making it challenging for the victim to escape the abusive situation[25].

Economic violence is not limited to individual relationships; it can also manifest at the societal level. Structural barriers such as wage gaps, discrimination in hiring practices, and lack of access to education and training can perpetuate economic violence against marginalized groups. These systemic issues can hinder individuals' ability to achieve financial independence and security[26].

[21] Adams, A. E., Sullivan, C. M., Bybee, D., & Sullivan, T. (2008). *Development of the economic abuse scale. Violence Against Women*, 14(5), 563-588. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801208319365

[22] Duvvury, N., Grown, C., & Cañete, M. (2013). *The costs of violence: An analysis of the economic impact of gender-based violence*. The World Bank. Retrieved from https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/16480

[23] Truman, J. L., & Morgan, R. E. (2016). *Nonfatal domestic violence,* 2003–2012. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

[24] International Labour Organization. (2017). *Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/global-estimates-of-modern-slavery-2017/lang--en/index.htm on 29/9/2024

[25] Adams, A. E., Sullivan, C. M., Bybee, D., & Sullivan, T. (2008). *Development of the economic abuse scale. Violence Against Women*, 14(5), 563-588. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801208319365

[26] Panda, P., & Agarwal, B. (2005). *Marital violence, human capital, and the role of women's property rights in India. World Development*, 33(5), 823-850. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.11.004

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1.1.3 Emotional Violence

Emotional violence, also known as psychological or mental abuse, involves the use of verbal and non-verbal communication to manipulate, control, or harm another individual's emotional well-being. This form of violence can be as damaging as physical abuse, leading to long-term psychological consequences for victims. In conflict settings, emotional violence-often referred to as psychological or mental abuse-manifests through verbal and non-verbal communication aimed at manipulating, controlling, or undermining an individual's emotional well-being. This form of violence can be as devastating as physical abuse, with long-term psychological repercussions for victims, particularly in environments where instability and fear are rampant. The trauma inflicted by emotional violence can severely hinder recovery and resilience among affected individuals and communities. In these settings, women are emotionally blackmailed to succumb to different types of abuse for fear of them or their loved ones being subjected to torture, rape or being ripped off of their assets. Recognizing the different manifestations of emotional violence is essential for developing effective support and intervention strategies tailored to the unique challenges faced by survivors in conflict-affected areas.

Verbal abuse includes the use of words to demean, belittle, or intimidate an individual. This can manifest as yelling, insults, threats, or constant criticism. Verbal abuse can create an environment of fear and insecurity, significantly impacting the victim's self-esteem and mental health[27]. Over time, the cumulative effect of verbal abuse can lead to severe psychological distress.

Gaslighting is a manipulative tactic where the abuser makes the victim doubt their perceptions, memories, or feelings. This form of emotional violence can lead victims to question their reality and sanity, fostering confusion and dependency on the abuser. Research indicates that gaslighting can have profound psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth[28].

Isolation involves controlling a victim's social interactions and relationships, effectively cutting them off from support networks. This can include preventing contact with friends and family or monitoring communication. Isolation can leave victims feeling alone and powerless, making it difficult for them to seek help or escape the abusive situation[29].

Manipulation can take many forms, including coercive tactics that pressure individuals to conform to the abuser's demands. This may involve guilt-tripping, playing the victim, or using emotional outbursts to control the victim's behavior. The constant need to cater to the abuser's emotional needs can create a toxic dynamic that undermines the victim's autonomy[30].

Threats of violence or harm, whether direct or implied, are forms of emotional violence that instill fear in victims. This can include threats to harm the victim, their loved ones, or their pets, creating a climate of terror that forces compliance. Such intimidation tactics can lead to significant psychological trauma and hinder the victim's ability to leave the abusive relationship[31].

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[27] Hamberger, L. K., & Hastings, J. E. (1993). *The role of anger in the experience of domestic violence. Violence and Victims*, 8(2), 169-181. https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.8.2.169
[28] Stern, L. (2018). *Gaslighting: A psychological manipulation technique. Psychology Today.* Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-moment-youth/201801/gaslighting-psychological-manipulation-technique
[29] Johnson, M. P. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence. Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 26(1), 127-129
[30] Ibid
[31] Dutton, M. A. (2006). *The impact of intimate partner violence on women's mental health*. In K. M. Hagan & D. K. G. Dwyer (Eds.), *The psychology of women and gender: Theory, research, and social action* (pp. 183-204). New York: Wiley.

Humiliation involves intentionally embarrassing or degrading an individual in front of others. This can occur through public insults, belittling comments, or other actions designed to undermine the victim's dignity. Humiliation can have lasting effects on an individual's self-esteem and mental health, leading to feelings of worthlessness and despair[32].

1.1.4 Sexual Violence

Black's Law Dictionary defines sexual violence as "any sexual act directed against another person, including acts of a sexual nature committed against persons without their consent." This definition encompasses a broad range of behaviors, including but not limited to rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and other forms of coerced sexual conduct. The emphasis here is on the lack of consent and the resulting harm to the victim. Sexual violence also refers to any sexual act or attempts to obtain a sexual act by violence, coercion, threats, or manipulation. It encompasses a broad range of behaviors that violate an individual's autonomy and right to consent, leading to significant physical and psychological harm. Understanding the forms of sexual violence is essential for developing effective prevention strategies and support systems for survivors. In one case, the court addressed sexual assault against a minor, reinforcing the legal obligation to protect vulnerable populations. The judgment made clear that the definition of sexual violence includes not just physical acts but also the psychological harm inflicted on victims[33].

Rape is also one of the most severe forms of sexual violence and involves non-consensual sexual intercourse. It can occur in various contexts, including intimate relationships, date scenarios, and stranger assaults. According to the World Health Organization[34], approximately 1 in 3 women globally have experienced either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, with rape being a predominant concern. In conflict settings, rape is one of the most severe forms of sexual violence, characterized by non-consensual sexual intercourse. This violation can occur in numerous contexts, including within intimate relationships, during forced situations, or as part of broader acts of violence against civilians. In the chaos of conflict, the traditional safeguards against such violence often break down, leaving individuals, particularly women and girls, highly vulnerable to sexual assault. For instance, Armed groups may use rape as a weapon to assert power, instill fear, and demoralize communities. Soldiers may assault women in occupied territories, with the intent of humiliating both the victims and their communities. Conversely, in displacement camps or during mass displacements, the lack of security and resources can lead to increased risks of sexual violence. Women and girls often face heightened vulnerability due to the breakdown of social structures and the absence of protective mechanisms. Additionally, during the Sierra Leone civil war, sexual violence was systematically employed as a strategy of war. Women and girls were subjected to horrific acts, which not only violated their rights but also destabilized communities. In the aftermath, women's involvement in peacebuilding was crucial for addressing the legacy of violence, fostering reconciliation, and rebuilding societal trust[35].

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[32] Follingstad, D. R., Rutledge, L., Berg, B. J., & Hause, E. S. (2005). *The role of emotional abuse in women's experiences of intimate partner violence*. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20(5), 566-577

[33] Case of Judgment No. 40/2019 of the Court of Appeal, Bamenda:

[34] World Health Organization. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*

[35] Pruitt, D. G. (2021). *Women's roles in peacebuilding: The case of Liberia*. Journal of Peace Research, 58(4), 564-578.

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Sexual assault encompasses a range of unwanted sexual acts, including groping, fondling, and other forms of sexual coercion. Unlike rape, sexual assault does not always involve penetration but still violates an individual's right to consent and bodily autonomy. The Bureau of Justice Statistics[36]reports that millions of individuals experience sexual assault each year in the United States.

Sexual harassment includes unwanted sexual advances, comments, or behaviors that create a hostile environment. This can occur in various settings, such as workplaces, schools, or public spaces. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission[37]defines sexual harassment as a form of discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, highlighting its prevalence and impact on individuals' well-being. In conflict zones, sexual harassment manifests as unwanted sexual advances, comments, or behaviors that contribute to a hostile and unsafe environment. This form of violence can occur in various contexts, including humanitarian aid settings, refugee camps, and displaced persons' shelters, where power dynamics are often skewed and individuals are particularly vulnerable. For instance, in overcrowded and under-resourced camps, the lack of privacy and security can lead to an increase in incidents of sexual harassment. Women and girls, in particular, may face harassment while seeking basic services or navigating daily life in these precarious environments. Conversely, one case involved Florence who was a victim of sexual violence during the ongoing conflict. Florence was reportedly exposed naked in public by armed individuals, an act meant to humiliate and degrade her. This incident highlights the brutal tactics used to instill fear and assert control over communities.

Sex trafficking involves the coercion, manipulation, or deceit of individuals into engaging in commercial sex acts against their will. This form of sexual violence is a severe violation of human rights and often targets vulnerable populations, including women and children. The Polaris Project[38] reports that sex trafficking is a significant issue globally, with millions of individuals affected.

1.2 The Intersection of GBV and Peacebuilding

Gender-Based Violence refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, primarily affecting women and girls but also impacting men and boys. This violence stems from entrenched gender inequalities and power imbalances present in many societies. GBV encompasses a range of abusive behaviors, including physical violence, sexual violence, emotional and psychological abuse, as well as economic control. The prevalence of GBV is a global issue, deeply rooted in cultural norms, economic disparities, and social structures. The consequences of GBV are profound and far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate health and well-being of survivors but also their social relationships, economic opportunities, and access to justice. Survivors often face long-term psychological trauma, stigma, and barriers to recovery, making it a critical public health and human rights concern. Addressing GBV is essential for promoting gender equality and ensuring that all individuals can live free from violence and discrimination.

Peacebuilding is a multifaceted process aimed at preventing conflict, fostering social cohesion, and establishing sustainable peace in societies affected by violence. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the development of strong, inclusive institutions that uphold justice and human rights. Peacebuilding efforts often focus on addressing the root causes of conflict, such as political exclusion, economic inequality, and social

[36] Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2020). *National crime victimization survey*. Retrieved from https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=ncsv

[37] Ibid

[38] Polaris Project. (2020). *The facts: Human trafficking in the United States*. Retrieved from https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/facts/

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injustice, while promoting dialogue and understanding among conflicting parties. This process is not limited to post-conflict reconstruction; it also involves proactive measures to prevent the outbreak of violence through diplomacy, community engagement, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. Effective peacebuilding requires the active participation of various stakeholders, including local communities, civil society, and marginalized groups. By fostering inclusive processes that prioritize the voices and needs of all individuals, peacebuilding initiatives can create resilient societies capable of sustaining peace and addressing grievances without resorting to violence.

The intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and peacebuilding is a critical area of study, particularly in regions affected by conflict[39]. because GBV often escalates in conflict situations, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable peace and stability. In regions affected by conflict, the breakdown of social structures and the emergence of power vacuums can lead to increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence, which not only inflicts immediate harm on individuals but also disrupts community cohesion and trust. When GBV is prevalent, it can hinder the participation of women and marginalized groups in peace processes, preventing diverse perspectives from shaping effective solutions. Furthermore, failing to address GBV in peacebuilding initiatives can perpetuate cycles of violence and trauma, making it difficult for communities to heal and rebuild. Therefore, understanding and addressing the dynamics of GBV is essential for creating comprehensive peacebuilding strategies that promote justice, equality, and lasting stability in affected regions. GBV not only serves as a weapon of war but also exacerbates existing inequalities, disrupts social cohesion, and hinders long-term peace efforts[40]. Understanding this intersection is essential for developing effective peacebuilding strategies that address the root causes of violence and promote sustainable peace.

The ongoing conflict in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon has led to a significant increase in GBV. Reports indicate that women are subjected to sexual violence by armed groups and face domestic violence as societal structures break down[41]. This exacerbation of GBV not only affects the victims but also complicates peacebuilding efforts, as the trauma and stigma associated with violence impede women's participation in peace processes.

GBV encompasses a range of harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence[42]. In conflict settings, GBV often escalates, with women and girls facing heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking. This violence is frequently used as a tactic to instill fear, exert control, and undermine the social fabric of communities[43].

Peacebuilding refers to the efforts aimed at creating conditions for sustainable peace, including addressing the root causes of conflict, fostering reconciliation, and rebuilding social cohesion[44]. In this context, the relationship between GBV and peacebuilding is critical, as GBV can both stem from and exacerbate conflicts, creating a cycle that undermines peace efforts. For effective

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[39] Pruitt, D. G. (2021). *Women's roles in peacebuilding: The case of Liberia.* Journal of Peace Research, 58(4), 564-578. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343321991969
[40] UN Women. (2020). *The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19.* Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response
[41] International Crisis Group. (2020). *Cameroon: The Anglophone Crisis*. Retrieved from [International Crisis Group website link].

[43] UN Women. (2020). *The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*.
[44] Sweeney, A. (2019). *Gender and peacebuilding: A critical perspective. Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(5), 493-511. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2019.1688987

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peacebuilding, it is essential to recognize and address the implications of GBV, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are integrated into conflict resolution processes[45].

1.2 The Role of Women in Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is an essential process aimed at creating lasting peace and stability in societies affected by conflict[46]. It encompasses a range of activities designed to address the root causes of violence, promote reconciliation, and rebuild social cohesion. Women play a crucial and often transformative role in peacebuilding efforts, yet their contributions have historically been overlooked and undervalued[47]. Understanding the unique perspectives and capabilities that women bring to peace processes is essential for fostering inclusive and effective resolutions to conflict[48].

Historically, in Cameroon, women have been marginalized in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, often relegated to supportive roles rather than being recognized as key decision-makers[49]. However, numerous global frameworks, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, have emerged to advocate for the inclusion of women in peace and security initiatives[50]. This resolution emphasizes the importance of women's participation in all aspects of peace processes and acknowledges their critical role in preventing conflict and fostering sustainable peace[51].

Despite the challenges posed by GBV, women have historically played crucial roles in peacebuilding[52]. Their unique perspectives and experiences can contribute significantly to creating sustainable peace. Women often advocate for inclusive processes that address the needs of the entire community, emphasizing social justice and reconciliation[53].

A case in point was in Liberia where the Women's Peace Movement serves as a powerful illustration of the impact women can have in peacebuilding. In the early 2000s, Liberian women organized protests and peace marches, ultimately contributing to the end of a brutal civil war and

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[45] United Nations. (2016). *Sustaining peace: An agenda for peacebuilding and sustaining peace*. Retrieved
from https://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.en.peacebuilding/files/documents/sg_report_sustaining_peace.pdf

[47] Sookrajh, R. (2018). *Gender-based violence and peacebuilding: An analysis of the role of women in peace efforts in Sri Lanka*. *Peacebuilding*, 6(1), 1-15.
[48] Rehn, E., & Johnson Sirleaf, E. (2002). *Women, war, peace: The independent experts' assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building*. United Nations Development Fund for Women. Retrieved
from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2002/1/women-war-peace
[49] Cohn, I. G., & Kessler, E. (2020). *Peacebuilding in the context of gender-based violence: A review of the literature*. *Journal of Peace Research*, 57(2), 145-160.
[50] Banerjee, S. (2015). *Gender-based violence and peace processes: The case of Myanmar*. *Peacebuilding*, 3(3), 274-287
[51] Mertus, J. A., & Helsing, A. (2016). *Gender and peacebuilding: A global perspective on women's roles in peace processes*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (pp. 233-251). Oxford University Press.
[52] Zuckerman, E. (2018). *Gender-based violence and its impact on peacebuilding: A case study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. *African Security Review*, 27(3), 200-210. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2018.1466606
[53] Ibid

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the establishment of a more inclusive government[54]. This movement underscores the potential for women to lead transformative change, even in the aftermath of GBV.

Women often mobilize grassroots movements to advocate for peace and justice in their communities. They raise awareness about the impacts of conflict and GBV, pushing for policy changes and protections for vulnerable populations. In Liberia, women led the "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace" movement, organizing peaceful protests that played a significant role in bringing an end to the civil war in 2003. Their activism highlighted the need for peace and security, leading to the involvement of women in the peace negotiations.

Women have been effective mediators in peace processes, often bringing unique perspectives that emphasize dialogue and reconciliation rather than violence. In the Northern Ireland peace process, women from various communities formed the Women's Coalition, advocating for inclusive negotiations. Their efforts helped ensure that women's voices were heard in the Good Friday Agreement, contributing to a more comprehensive peace.

Women frequently assume leadership roles within their communities, fostering social cohesion and resilience during and after conflicts. They provide essential support services and promote reconciliation efforts. In Rwanda, after the genocide in 1994, women played a pivotal role in rebuilding their communities. They engaged in peacebuilding initiatives, such as the establishment of community-based organizations that focused on reconciliation and conflict resolution, helping to heal the societal rifts.

Women's participation in formal peace negotiations has been shown to increase the durability and effectiveness of peace agreements. Their inclusion can lead to more comprehensive solutions that address the needs of diverse populations. In the peace talks in the Philippines regarding the Mindanao conflict, women's groups actively participated in the negotiations, advocating for provisions that addressed gender equality and protections against GBV, which were subsequently incorporated into the final peace agreement.

Women often take on the role of documenting human rights abuses, including GBV, during conflicts. Their testimonies can bring attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's organizations have been instrumental in documenting cases of sexual violence as a weapon of war, providing evidence that has been used in international courts to hold perpetrators accountable.

The role of women in peacebuilding is multifaceted and vital for creating sustainable and inclusive peace. Recognizing and supporting women's contributions, enables societies to leverage their unique perspectives and experiences to foster resilience, promote social justice, and build lasting peace[55]. Ensuring women's active participation in peace processes is not merely a matter of fairness; it is essential for developing comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of conflict and promote a more equitable and just society[56]. Emphasizing women's roles in peacebuilding efforts can lead to more effective and durable outcomes, ultimately benefiting entire communities and nations[57].

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[54] Pruitt, D. G. (2021). *Women's roles in peacebuilding: The case of Liberia*. Journal of Peace Research, 58(4), 564-578.

[55] Karam, A. (2018). *The role of women in peacebuilding: Key lessons from the field*. *Peacebuilding*, 6(4), 328-345

[56] McKay, S. (2004). *Rebuilding shattered lives: Promoting the rights of women and girls in post-conflict settings*. International Journal of Transitional Justice, 1(3), 47-65.

[57] Bunch, C. (1990). *Women's rights as human rights: Toward a re-vision of human rights*. In *Human rights in the 21st century: Sovereignty, civil society, culture* (pp. 113-134). University of California Press.

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1.3 The Importance of Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Women play a vital role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Their unique perspectives, experiences, and needs are essential for developing comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of conflict[58]. When women are actively involved in peace processes, the outcomes tend to be more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of the entire community.

Women's participation in peacebuilding is crucial for several reasons, fundamentally rooted in the principles of equality, justice, and sustainable development. First, women often experience conflict differently than men, facing unique challenges such as gender-based violence and economic disenfranchisement. Their perspectives are essential for understanding the full impact of conflict on communities and for addressing the needs of all affected populations. Research has shown that when women are included in peace processes, the resulting agreements are more likely to be comprehensive and sustainable, as they tend to address a broader range of social issues, including human rights, education, and health. Furthermore, women's involvement in peacebuilding fosters social cohesion and trust within communities, as they often play key roles in grassroots movements and local initiatives that promote dialogue and reconciliation. Empowering women to take active roles in peacebuilding, helps societies not only to enhance the effectiveness of peace initiatives but to also work towards achieving broader gender equality and social justice, ultimately contributing to lasting peace.

Women's participation in peacebuilding is vital because it brings diverse perspectives and experiences that enrich the peace process, making it more comprehensive and effective. Women often face unique challenges in conflict situations, such as gender-based violence and economic marginalization, and their insights are crucial for addressing the root causes of conflict and ensuring that peace agreements reflect the needs of all community members. Research has shown that peace agreements are more sustainable when women are involved, as they tend to incorporate provisions that promote human rights, social justice, and economic stability. Furthermore, women's engagement fosters social cohesion, encourages dialogue, and builds trust within communities, which are essential elements for lasting peace. Societies not only enhance the effectiveness of their peace initiatives but also work towards greater gender equality and resilience in the face of future conflicts by empowering women to take active roles in peacebuilding, societies not only enhance the effectiveness of their peace initiatives but also work towards greater gender equality and resilience in the face of future conflicts.

1.3.1 Women as Community Leaders

Women often serve as key leaders in their communities, particularly in post-conflict settings. They are typically responsible for rebuilding social cohesion and fostering reconciliation among divided groups. Women's involvement in local governance and peace initiatives can lead to more equitable solutions that address the needs of all community members[59].

For example, in Liberia, women played a crucial role in ending the civil war by organizing peaceful protests and advocating for peace at the negotiation table. Their efforts were recognized in the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkol Karman, highlighting the significance of women's contributions to peace efforts[60].

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[58] Sookrajh, R. (2018). *Gender-based violence and peacebuilding: An analysis of the role of women in peace efforts in Sri Lanka*. Peacebuilding, 6(1), 1-15

[59] UN Women. (2012). *Women's participation in peacebuilding: A global perspective*. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2012/1/women-s-participation-in-peacebuilding

[60] Rehn, E., & Johnson Sirleaf, E. (2002). *Women, war, peace: The independent experts' assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building*.

1.3.2 Mediators and Negotiators

Women are increasingly recognized in the Northern Ireland as effective mediators and negotiators in peace processes[61]. Their ability to communicate and build trust can facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties. Studies have shown that including women in peace negotiations leads to more durable and comprehensive agreements[62].

For instance, a study by the United Nations found that peace agreements are 35% more likely to last for at least 15 years when women are involved in the negotiation process[63]. This underscores the importance of ensuring women's representation in formal peace talks.

1.3.3 Advocates for Human Rights

Women often advocate for human rights and social justice, addressing the root causes of conflict[64]. Their involvement in peacebuilding includes pushing for gender equality, economic opportunities, and protection against gender-based violence (GBV)[65]. Women's organizations frequently highlight the intersection of gender and conflict, emphasizing the need for policies that protect and empower women[66].

For example, during the Syrian civil war, women activists have mobilized to address issues of violence, displacement, and access to services, making significant contributions to humanitarian efforts and peace advocacy[67].

1.3.4 Educators and Community Mobilizers

Women play a vital role in educating their communities about peace and conflict resolution. They often serve as grassroots mobilizers, facilitating workshops and discussions that promote understanding and cooperation among community members. Fostering dialogue and shared experiences tends to women help build resilience and prevent future conflicts[68].

In Colombia, women-led organizations have been instrumental in promoting peace education and reconciliation initiatives, helping communities heal from decades of violence[69].

United Nations Development Fund for Women. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2002/1/women-war-peace

[61] Ibid

[62] Kumar, A. (2017). *Women's inclusion in peace processes: A global analysis*. *International Peacekeeping*, 24(3), 1-20

[63] Ibid

[64] Rehn, E., & Johnson Sirleaf, E. (2002). *Women, war, peace: The independent experts' assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building*. United Nations Development Fund for Women.

[65] Ibid

[66] Peterman, A., Potts, A., O'Donnell, M., Thompson, K., Shah, T., Oertwig, M., & O'Reilly, M. (2020). *Pandemic and partner violence: What the evidence says*. The World Bank. Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/publication/pandemic-partner-violence-what-the-evidence-says

[67] Karam, A. (2018). The impact of conflict on gender-based violence: Evidence from the Syrian civil war. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 12, 12.

[68] Sweeney, A. (2019). *Gender and peacebuilding: A critical perspective*. Conflict, Security & Development, 19(5), 511.

[69] Oxfam. (2019). *Time to act: The impact of conflict on women and girls*. Retrieved from https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620299/rr-time-to-act-violence-against-women-290519-en.pdf

The pervasive nature of gender-based violence (GBV) in the conflict-affected regions of Northwest and Southwest Cameroon has had a detrimental impact on women's ability to meaningfully participate in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes[70]. Displaced women, who have often been direct victims of violence, find themselves further marginalized and excluded from the decision-making tables where the future of their communities is being determined[71].

This exclusion is rooted in the deep-seated gender norms and power imbalances that have been exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts[72]. The trauma and stigma associated with their experiences of GBV, combined with the erosion of their economic and social status, have eroded the confidence and agency of many displaced women, making it increasingly challenging for them to advocate for their needs and priorities[73]. As a result, the peace agreements and conflict resolution mechanisms that emerge often fail to adequately address the specific concerns and experiences of women, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and instability[74].

1.4 The effect of GBV on Peacebuilding Efforts

The effect of gender-based violence (GBV) on peacebuilding efforts is a critical issue that significantly impedes the attainment of sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions. GBV not only inflicts immediate harm on individuals but also undermines social cohesion, trust, and the overall stability of communities. In environments where violence is prevalent, the participation of women and marginalized groups in peace processes often diminishes, leading to a lack of diverse perspectives that are essential for comprehensive solutions. Furthermore, the trauma and disruption caused by GBV can perpetuate cycles of violence, making it challenging for societies to heal and rebuild. Understanding the intricate relationship between GBV and peacebuilding is essential for developing effective strategies that promote both safety and inclusivity in the pursuit of lasting peace.

1.4.1 BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The impact of GBV on women's participation in some conflict-affected regions of Cameroon extends beyond the realm of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The frequent targeting of women for acts of violence, including sexual assault, has had a detrimental effect on their ability to engage in political and economic activities, undermining their efforts to achieve meaningful empowerment and self-determination[75].

The fear of violence and the trauma associated with their experiences have forced many women to withdraw from public life, some limiting their involvement in local governance, community leadership, and entrepreneurial pursuits[76]. This, in turn, has reinforced the perception of women

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[70] Ibid

[71] Amnesty International. (2018). Cameroon: A turn for the worse: Violence and human rights violations in Anglophone Cameroon.

[72] Ibid

[73] International Crisis Group. (2019 report). Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue

[74] Ibid

[75] UN Women. (2018). *Women's Meaningful Participation in Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.*

[76] McCauley, M., & Kohn, R. (2018). *The impact of gender-based violence on women's economic empowerment. Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(6), 682-695.

as passive victims rather than active agents of change, further entrenching the gender-based power dynamics that contribute to the perpetuation of GBV[77].

1.4.2 Limited Economic Opportunities

The stigma associated with being a GBV survivor can limit access to job opportunities and economic resources[78]. Employers may discriminate against women who have experienced violence, thereby reducing their employment prospects and financial independence[79].

 In a survey conducted in Cameroon, women reported that their experiences of GBV negatively impacted their job applications and interviews, as potential employers harbored biases against them[80].

Survivors often incur additional healthcare costs related to the treatment of injuries sustained from violence, mental health support, and other related health issues[81]. These financial burdens can lead to increased debt and economic instability.

A report by WORDE highlighted that many women in Cameroon faced difficulties paying for medical treatments following incidents of violence, which further entrenched their financial insecurity and endanger their health[82].

1.4.3 EROSION OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ROLES WITHIN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

The devastating impact of GBV on women's participation and decision-making in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon is also evident in the erosion of their traditional leadership roles within their communities[83]. Prior to the conflicts, women in these regions often played vital roles in mediating disputes, preserving cultural traditions, and supporting the social and economic well-being of their communities[84].

However, the displacement and disruption caused by the ongoing violence have undermined the foundations of these community-based leadership structures, with women increasingly forced to prioritize their own survival and that of their families over their traditional roles and responsibilities. The loss of these vital leadership positions has not only deprived these communities of the unique perspectives and insights that women can provide, but it has also contributed to the further marginalization of women in the decision-making processes that shape the future of their societies[85].

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[77] Oxfam. (2017). Conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions. Retrieved from https://www.oxfam.org/en/conflict-cameroons-anglophone-regions

[78] Zuckerman, E. (2018). *Gender-based violence and its impact on women's economic empowerment: A case study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. African Security Review, 27(3), 200-210. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2018.1466606

[79] Ibid

[80] Ibid-Mukulu 2019

[81] Ibid

[82] Ibid- (WORDE, 2021)

[83] Ibid

[84] CARE. (2020 report)p9. *Gender-Based Violence in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.*

[85] OCHA. (2019). Cameroon: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020.

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1.4.4 The Role of Stigma and Fear in Preventing Women from Participating in Peacebuilding Efforts

Women have historically played vital roles in peacebuilding, yet their participation is often hindered by stigma and fear, particularly in contexts affected by gender-based violence (GBV)[86]. These two factors create formidable barriers that can silence women's voices and inhibit their contributions to conflict resolution and community rebuilding[87]. Understanding how stigma and fear operate in this context is essential for developing strategies to promote women's active involvement in peace processes.

1.4.3.1 Understanding Stigma and Fear

Stigma, in the context of gender-based violence (GBV), significantly exacerbates the challenges faced by survivors, perpetuating a cycle of silence and suffering that hinders both individual recovery and broader societal healing[88]. This stigma often manifests through victim-blaming, where societal narratives shift responsibility onto the survivors rather than the perpetrators, leading to harmful perceptions that reinforce discrimination and ostracism. Women who experience violence frequently internalize this stigma, feeling ashamed or fearful of disclosing their experiences due to the potential for social repercussions, such as being shunned by their communities or facing judgment from peers and family. This fear of disclosure not only deepens their isolation but also discourages others from coming forward, effectively silencing critical voices that could contribute to raising awareness and driving change[89]. Moreover, such stigma undermines efforts to address GBV at a systemic level, as it fosters an environment where the issue remains hidden and unaddressed. Thus, combating stigma is essential not only for empowering survivors but also for creating a society that acknowledges and actively works to eliminate GBV, fostering an environment where all individuals can seek help and support without fear of retribution or shame[90].

Fear is a powerful emotion that can paralyze individuals and prevent them from taking action[91]. In the context of GBV, fear can stem from various sources, including the threat of further violence, retaliation from perpetrators, and the possibility of societal rejection. This fear can deter women from participating in peacebuilding initiatives, even when they possess valuable insights and perspectives[92].

1.4.3.2 The Impact of Stigma and Fear on Women's Participation

The psychological impact of GBV, compounded by stigma and fear, can lead to feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem among survivors[93]. Many women may internalize societal stigma, believing that they are to blame for the violence they experienced. This internalized

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[86]Cohn, I. G., & Kessler, E. (2020). *Peacebuilding in the context of gender-based violence: A review of the literature*. Journal of Peace Research, 57(2), 145-160.

[87] Sookrajh, R. (2018). *Gender-based violence and peacebuilding: An analysis of the role of women in peace efforts in Sri Lanka*. Peacebuilding, 6(1), 11.

[88] Ibid

[89] Heise, L. L., & Fulu, E. (2014). *Ending violence against women: A challenge for development and democracy*. The Lancet, 383(9920), 1490-1492.

[90] Pruitt, D. G., & Kim, S. H. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement*. McGraw-Hill.

[91] Heise, L. L. (1998). *Violence against women: An end to silence*. International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics, 63(S1), S1-S10. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0020-7292(98)00167-2

[92] Zuckerman, E. (2018). *Gender-based violence and its impact on women's economic empowerment: A case study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. African Security Review, 27(3), 200-210

[93] Ibid

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stigma can result in withdrawal from social and political activities, thereby limiting their participation in peacebuilding[94].

In Cameroon, women who have faced GBV often report feelings of shame and fear of retaliation, which prevents them from engaging in community discussions about peace and reconciliation[95]. This psychological barrier not only affects individual women but also hinders broader community efforts toward peace.

Stigma can lead to social isolation for women who have experienced violence[96]. The fear of being ostracized by their communities can discourage women from speaking out about their experiences or participating in collective efforts to promote peace[97]. This isolation can prevent them from forming networks of support that are crucial for effective advocacy and community engagement[98].

Research in conflict-affected regions of Cameroon has shown that women often face exclusion from community meetings and decision-making processes due to stigma surrounding their experiences with GBV, thereby limiting their ability to influence peacebuilding efforts[99].

Fear of stigma can also prevent women from seeking the resources and support they need to engage in peacebuilding. This includes access to education, legal assistance, and mental health services. When women do not feel safe or supported, they are less likely to pursue opportunities to participate in peace initiatives.

Example: In many parts of Cameroon, women who seek help after experiencing violence often encounter judgment and stigma from service providers, deterring them from seeking assistance and further limiting their participation in peacebuilding processes[100].

The stigma and fear experienced by women in the context of GBV contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality[101]. When women's voices are silenced, it reinforces the notion that their experiences and perspectives are less valuable than those of men. This imbalance not only affects women but also undermines the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, as diverse perspectives are essential for addressing the root causes of conflict[102].

Example: The exclusion of women from peace negotiations in various post-conflict settings has often resulted in agreements that fail to address the needs of half the population, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability[103].

[94] Dempsey, M. (2017). *Fear and gender-based violence: A qualitative study of women's experiences in conflict settings. Global Health Action*, 10(1), 1-10.
[95] (WORDE, 2021)

[97] Bunch, C., & Carrillo, T. (2018). *Women's rights are human rights: The case for women's inclusion in peacebuilding*. Peacebuilding, 6(4), 309-325.
[98] Ibid
[99] (Mukulu, 2019).
[100] Cameroon Gender and Development Network. (2020). *Women's participation in peacebuilding in Cameroon: Challenges and opportunities*. P10
[101] Ibid
[102] Ibid
[103] (Pruitt, 2021)p10

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1.4.3.3 Strategies to Overcome Stigma and Fear

Raising awareness about GBV and its impact on communities is essential for reducing stigma. Educational campaigns can help change societal perceptions and promote understanding of the complexities surrounding GBV.

Creating safe spaces for women to share their experiences and form supportive networks can help combat stigma. These networks can empower women to engage in peacebuilding and advocacy efforts.

Strengthening legal protections for survivors of GBV and ensuring that policies explicitly promote women's participation in peacebuilding can help mitigate fear. When women feel that they have legal backing and community support, they are more likely to engage in peace processes.

Involving men in discussions about GBV and peacebuilding can help challenge harmful norms and reduce stigma. Encouraging men to advocate for women's rights and support their participation in peace processes can promote a more inclusive environment.

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[105] Bunch, C., & Carrillo, T. (2018). *Women's rights are human rights: The case for women's inclusion in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding,* 6(4), 309-325.
[106] Ibid
[107] (Mukulu, 2019).
[108] Cameroon Gender and Development Network. (2020). *Women's participation in peacebuilding in Cameroon: Challenges and opportunities.* P10
[109] Ibid
[110] Ibid

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Stigma and fear are significant barriers that prevent women from fully participating in peacebuilding efforts, particularly in contexts marked by gender-based violence. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes awareness-raising, community support, and policy reforms. Societies can, enhance their peacebuilding efforts and move toward more inclusive and sustainable solutions by fostering an environment where women feel safe, valued, and empowered.

1.5 ADDRESSING THE BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

Addressing the barriers to women's participation and decision-making in conflict-affected areas of Cameroon will require a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying drivers of GBV and the broader gender-based inequalities that perpetuate these challenges. This should include the implementation of targeted interventions to support the physical and psychological recovery of GBV survivors, the provision of economic empowerment opportunities to displaced women, and the active inclusion of women's voices and perspectives in all conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives[112].

Moreover, it is essential to challenge the deeply entrenched gender norms and power structures that have historically excluded women from positions of influence and decision-making. This will require sustained advocacy, community engagement, and the promotion of positive role models to demonstrate the vital contributions that women can make to the peace and stability of their communities[113].

Only by addressing the complex intersection of GBV, displacement, and the erosion of women's leadership can we create the conditions necessary for the meaningful participation and empowerment of women in the conflict-affected regions of Cameroon. This, in turn, will not only

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[111] (Pruitt, 2021)p10

[112] UNHCR. (2020). UNHCR's Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement. Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/idps/5ff80a6d4/unhcrs-engagement-situations-internal-displacement.html

[113] UNDP. (2018). Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Public Administration: Cameroon Case Study.

improve the lives of women and girls but also contribute to the long-term stability and prosperity of the region as a whole.

1.6 Relevant Laws and Frameworks Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Women's Participation

The CEDAW[114] serves as a foundational international treaty that mandates countries to eliminate discrimination against women in all spheres of life. CEDAW emphasizes the need for states to take appropriate measures to ensure women's equal participation in decision-making processes, including those related to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. By highlighting the systemic barriers that prevent women's full engagement, CEDAW provides a crucial framework for advocating for their rights and addressing the impact of gender-based violence on their involvement in these critical areas.

Further reinforcing this commitment, UN Security Council Resolution[115] specifically addresses the importance of women's participation in matters of peace and security. This resolution recognizes that women's experiences and contributions are vital to sustainable peace, urging member states to integrate gender perspectives into all peace negotiations. It calls for the inclusion of women in all levels of decision-making, which is essential for ensuring that peace processes are comprehensive and reflective of the needs of the entire community. By mandating the incorporation of women's voices, this resolution underlines the direct correlation between addressing GBV and fostering more inclusive peacebuilding efforts.

In a similar vein, UN Security Council Resolution 116 directly confronts the issue of sexual violence in conflict, recognizing it as a war tactic that undermines peace and security. This resolution explicitly calls for the protection of women and girls from GBV and emphasizes that their participation is crucial to achieving lasting peace. It reinforces the idea that addressing sexual violence is not just a matter of human rights but also a strategic necessity for effective conflict resolution. This resolution strengthens the argument for integrating gender considerations into peacebuilding frameworks, by linking the prevention of GBV to peace.

Moreover, UN Security Council Resolution[117] builds upon the previous resolutions by advocating for increased representation of women in peace processes. It emphasizes the need for all member states to take concrete steps to ensure that women's participation is prioritized in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This resolution affirms that diverse perspectives, particularly those of women affected by conflict, lead to more sustainable and effective peace agreements. By reinforcing the importance of women's active involvement, it highlights that addressing GBV is essential to achieving comprehensive peace.

On a regional level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provides a significant legal foundation for promoting women's rights across the continent[118]. It emphasizes the protection of women's rights and their crucial role in society, calling on states to eliminate

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[114] United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women
[115] United Nations Security Council. (2000). *Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security*. https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000)
[116] UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008)
[117] United Nations Security Council. (2015). *Resolution 2242 (2015) on Women, Peace and Security*. https://undocs.org/S/RES/2242(2015)
[118] African Union. (2003). *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*. https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa

discrimination against women[119]. This Charter serves as a vital instrument for advocating for gender equality and the protection of women from violence, thereby supporting initiatives aimed at enhancing women's participation in peace processes.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, commonly known as the Maputo Protocol, further strengthens this legal framework by providing comprehensive protections for women's rights[120]. This protocol explicitly addresses GBV, mandating states to take legislative and other measures to prevent and punish acts of violence against women[121]. The Maputo Protocol is instrumental in fostering an environment where women can actively participate in all aspects of society, including conflict resolution and peacebuilding by focusing on the need for legal reforms and protective measures.

In the context of Cameroon, the Cameroon Penal Code includes provisions against various forms of violence, such as sexual and domestic violence, which are critical for establishing a legal basis for combating GBV[122]. By outlining specific offenses and penalties, the Penal Code provides a framework for holding perpetrators accountable and offers legal recourse for survivors[123]. This legal framework is essential for promoting a culture of accountability and safety, which is vital for encouraging women's participation in public life.

Additionally, the above law on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence is a significant legislative advancement in Cameroon. This law criminalizes all forms of GBV and mandates protective measures for survivors, thereby creating a more supportive legal environment for women seeking justice[124]. By ensuring that GBV is recognized and addressed within the legal system, this law empowers women to engage more actively in peace processes without the fear of violence.

Finally, the Cameroon Constitution enshrines the principle of equality between men and women, promoting the protection of women's rights. This constitutional guarantee provides a legal foundation for advocating women's active participation in decision-making processes, including those related to conflict resolution and peacebuilding[125]. By embedding gender equality in the national legal framework, the Constitution supports efforts to address the systemic barriers that hinder women's involvement and reinforces the necessity of integrating their perspectives into peace initiatives.

One can effectively argue for the critical importance of addressing GBV as a means to enhance women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding by drawing on these laws and frameworks. These legal instruments not only provide the necessary protections but also establish a robust framework for promoting gender equality and ensuring that women's voices are heard in shaping the future of their communities.

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[119] Article 18 of African Union. (2003). *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*. https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa

[120] African Union. (1986). *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*. https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights

[121] Ibid

[122] Cameroon Penal Code. (2016). *Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*. https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0b1f6d4.html

[123] Ibid

[124] Cameroon Penal Code. (2016). *Law No. 2016/007 of July 12, 2016, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence*. https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0b1f6d4.html

[125] Cameroon Constitution. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon*. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Cameroon_1996.pdf?lang=en

1.6 Conclusion

The impact of gender-based violence (GBV) on women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding is profound and multifaceted. GBV not only inflicts immediate physical and psychological harm but also creates systemic barriers that inhibit women's voices and contributions in critical peace processes. The stigma and fear associated with GBV can silence women, preventing them from engaging in community dialogues and decision-making roles essential for sustainable peace.

Addressing GBV is not only a matter of protecting individual rights but also a crucial step towards fostering inclusive and effective peacebuilding efforts. Societies can harness their unique perspectives and insights, ultimately leading to more comprehensive and lasting resolutions to conflict, by ensuring that women are empowered, supported, and safely integrated into peace processes.

In conclusion, recognizing and mitigating the impact of GBV on women's participation is vital for achieving equitable and sustainable peace. This requires a committed, multi-faceted approach involving legal reforms, community support, economic empowerment, and continuous advocacy for women's rights. Only by addressing these challenges can we create an environment where women can actively contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, resulting in stronger, more resilient communities.

1.7 Recommendations

Enhancing legal protections against GBV is crucial for creating an environment where women feel safe to participate in peacebuilding. This includes enacting laws that specifically address GBV and ensuring that existing laws are enforced effectively. Women may be more willing to engage in public life and contribute to conflict resolution efforts, when legal recourse and protection are provided.

Establishing safe spaces-both physical and psychological-allows women to gather, share their experiences, and discuss peacebuilding initiatives without fear of violence or stigma. These spaces can be community centers, support groups, or online forums where women can express their views and contribute to discussions on peace, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Implementing educational campaigns focused on the impacts of GBV and the importance of women's roles in peacebuilding is vital. These programs can target various audiences, including community leaders, men, and youth, to change societal attitudes and reduce stigma. Education can empower women with knowledge about their rights and the skills needed for active participation in peace processes.

Investing in local women's organizations that work on peace and security issues is essential for grassroots mobilization. These organizations often have deep connections within communities and can effectively advocate for women's rights and participation in peacebuilding. Providing them with resources and training can enhance their capacity to influence policy and engage in negotiations.
Ensuring that women are included in all stages of peace negotiations is critical for developing comprehensive solutions that address the needs of the entire community. Gender-inclusive processes lead to more sustainable peace agreements, as women often bring different perspectives and priorities to the table, particularly related to social justice and community rebuilding.
Economic independence is a key factor in enabling women to participate in peacebuilding. Programs that provide training, access to financial resources, and job opportunities can help

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women overcome the economic barriers associated with GBV. When women are financially secure, they are more likely to engage in public life and advocate for peace. Providing mental health support for survivors of GBV is crucial for their recovery and reintegration into community life. Trauma-informed care can help women process their experiences and rebuild their confidence, enabling them to contribute actively to peacebuilding initiatives. Support groups and counseling can also foster solidarity among women.

Facilitating discussions within communities about GBV and its impacts can help break the silence surrounding these issues. Engaging both men and women in dialogue fosters understanding and encourages collective action against GBV. Community leaders can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and advocating for women's participation in peace efforts.
Leveraging media and technology can amplify women's voices and experiences related to GBV and peacebuilding. Campaigns that highlight women's contributions to peace can shift public perceptions and challenge stereotypes. Social media platforms can serve as tools for advocacy, enabling women to share their stories and mobilize support.

Investing in research to understand the barriers women face in peacebuilding is essential for developing effective strategies. Monitoring women's participation in peace processes and assessing the impact of GBV prevention initiatives can provide insights into what works and what needs improvement. Data-driven approaches help tailor interventions to meet the specific needs of women in different contexts.

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