

Pieces of Peace: Grassroots Women-Leaders, Peacebuilding and the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Few or no studies have been undertaken that break down the peacebuilding activities of Grassroots Women-Leaders (GWL) into vital pieces that support the realization of the purpose of UNSCR1325. The study investigated how the activities of GWL in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, through four themes of interest (Gender-Based Violence, Women's Economic Empowerment, Menstrual Hygiene Management and Social Media Activism) that serve as pieces of peace, were contributing towards peacebuilding and the implementation of UNSCR1325. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed. Primary and secondary data was respectively gathered through semi-structured interview questionnaires and from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of Eight (08) participants who were purposively sampled, and the findings thematically analyzed. The findings revealed that despite being marginalized and underrepresented, Anglophone Cameroon GWL through the four themes, and based on their conceptualizations of peace, have been contributing to peacebuilding and the implementation of the Cameroon National Action Plan (CNAP) to UNSCR1325. Despite the lack of complete ownership over their project outcomes as a result of imposed project guidelines from international funders, administrative bottlenecks and other structural inequalities, these women are realizing sustainable peace using bottom-up approaches. The study concludes that the various locally conceived, "human-centered" and community driven peacebuilding activities of GWL serve as vital pieces of peace that contribute to building the big picture of world peace and supporting the realization of the purpose of UNSCR1325. It is recommended that local actions and realities should inform the formulation of future peacebuilding actions, NAPs to UNSCR1325 as well as funding priorities and not the other way round.

INTRODUCTION

Unanimously adopted in October 2000, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325) has been proclaimed as a flagship United Nations Security Council Resolution concerning women's security issues and as the greatest advancement in integrating issues concerning women into international security policy making (Olonisakin et al. 2011; Tryggstad, 2001). Celebrated as the most utilized advocacy tool by women activists and groups, with its emergence linked to conflicts in Africa (Hendricks, 2017; Diop, 2011), the UNSCR1325 opens up prospects for

increased representation and visibility for women around achieving greater participation in peace and security issues (Illesanmi, 2020; Shepherd, 2013) through its four basic pillars of participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery.

Following calls by the President of the UNSC in 2004 and 2005 on member states to develop UNSCR1325 National Action Plans (NAPs) through a government-civil society – development agency collaboration as a mark of commitment and responsibility of governments to foster the security of women and girls

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both in times of conflict and post conflict while enhancing their effective participation in peacebuilding processes (Illesanmi, 2020; Rayman et al., 2016) , the Cameroon Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF) worked with the Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in bringing in stakeholders around the development and adoption of a NAP in October 2017. In order to draw priority areas of the NAP, WILPF Cameroon was commissioned to conduct a national baseline study to assess the knowledge level on UNSCR 1325 and the impact armed conflicts had on women and girls in Cameroon. Very few stakeholders mainly MINPROFF, the United Office in Central Africa (UNOCA), UN Women, and the Sweden Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) were involved in the whole process (WILPF, 2017).

The adoption of the CNAP came off the heels of violent conflicts that erupted in 2016, in the Anglophone regions (North West and South West) of the country. The conflict which is being referred to as the Anglophone crises bears its roots to a plethora of causes ranging from the marginalization of the Common law practice and distortions of the Anglophone educational system (Okere, 2018; Jua & Konings, 2004) and disagreement over the form of the state with calls for secession or return to federalism (see Kaushal, 2020; Pommerolle, 2017; Atanga, 2011; Anyangwe, 2008; Konings & Nyamdoh, 2003; Konings & Nyamdoh, 1997). The ongoing violent conflict has had multifaceted impacts on women with the upsurge in hostilities exposing and compounding pre-existing vulnerabilities of women, girls and children in the Anglophone regions. Statistics as at July 2020 from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) put the total number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) at 340 474 including 69 310 returnees from the North West Region (NWR) and 347 757 IDPs including 168 039 returnees from the South West Region (SWR) (UNHCR, 2020). The United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on the other hand reports that as at March 2020 there were over 58 000 Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria with an estimated 200 000 IDPs in the Littoral and West regions (OCHA, 2020). The impact of the conflict on women has been severe especially in the domains of access to medical care and menstrual hygiene products, school dropout, increase in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and loss of economic independency (OCHA, 2020).

The conflict has equally seen a rise in the number of grassroots women-led organizations and grassroots women-leaders (GWL) who are employing several

strategies to resolve the crisis, including calls and actions around tolerance, care and patience as well as sensitizations through workshops, peaceful protests/march pass, advocacy, advice and dialogue (International Observatory of Human Rights, 2019). These GWL are serving as relief aid workers with some using social media as a tool/strategy to sway public opinion and contributing to reduce direct violence, pursuing human rights and democracy, transforming relationships and building capacities of their communities as a way to prevent violent conflicts (Nganji & Cockburn, 2020). In this study, these local actions of GWL will be used to demonstrate their contribution towards peacebuilding and the realization of the goals of UNSCR1325 from a local to a global perspective.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Grassroots women, despite the different forms of marginalization they experience, continue to play significant roles in peacebuilding (Marshall, 2000). This is particularly because their everyday realities, efforts and challenges give them a better guide to bring in unique points of view that have a transformative impact on the leading male discourse on peacebuilding (Adeogun & Muthuki, 2018). Despite these strong assertions and the celebration of the UNSCR1325 as a veritable guide for the promotion of the role of women and girls in peacebuilding processes, the development/adoption of the Cameroon UNSCR1325 NAP (CNAP) one year into violent conflicts in the Anglophone regions failed to make priority the adequate consultation and involvement of grassroots women leaders (GWL) who are leading peacebuilding activities in the two regions. The efforts of GWL have also remained under-represented or overlooked. For example, out of the 69 persons invited by the Governor of the NWR to a brainstorming meeting (to propose peaceful solutions to the ongoing Anglophone crises) in preparation for the Major National Dialogue that held from the 30th of September to 4th of October 2019, only 7 were women (see Press Release of 20 September 2019 by the Governor of the North West Region). On the other hand, the media continues to portray women as victims rather than actors in the peacebuilding process. Out of 1,964 English articles that were written in relation to the crisis between October 2016 and March 2019, while sixty four percent (1204) discussed men, only sixteen percent (309) of these mentioned "women" (IPS News, 2019).

Despite these different forms of marginalization – from structural inequalities such as GBV, patriarchy and poverty/limited access to resources – these

women at the grassroots are playing an important role in peacebuilding and driving the implementation of UNSCR1325 in Cameroon that is worth recognizing and properly represented for scale up. Furthermore, the limited/strict sources of funding and the most often required/obliged project outcomes in relation to funding for their activities questions the extent to which these local GWL's actions are local in relation to agency and ownership.

Such actions fail to recognize how agency, ownership and local realities are vital pieces in the peacebuilding landscape that ideally represent what peacebuilding entails and support the realization of the purpose of UNSCR1325.

The Research Questions

In order to meet the above objectives, this research focused on one principal research question: How are Anglophone Grassroots Women-Leaders (GWL) involved in the implementation of UNSCR1325 and the peacebuilding process in Cameroon?

The following sub-questions were investigated:

1. What is peace and peacebuilding to a GWL?
2. What activities are GWL carrying out to lead the implementation of UNSCR1325 from a local viewpoint?
3. Are GWL contributing to the fulfillment of the objective of UNSCR1325 in Cameroon through their initiatives?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive research design was used to answer the research questions from the perspectives of the GWL. The study used thematic analysis (De la Rey & McKay, 2006) with a deductive approach to investigate how the respondents contributed to the implementation of UNSCR1325 and peacebuilding in Cameroon through the four themes of interest.

The qualitative descriptive research design was needed to enhance a deeper understanding (Silverman, 2010) of the participants' perception of peacebuilding and give visibility to GWL whose voices are most often ignored or silenced (Asher, 2001; Silverman, 2010) and to highlight the role they play in the implementation of UNSCR1325 in Cameroon. The deductive approach was used considering that a pre-determined set of themes had already been defined and the data collection methods focused on gathering data relevant to those themes.

Like similar studies in Africa, (Cornelius-Ukpepi et al., 2015; Etekpe, 2012; Olofinbiyi & Steyn, 2018) a purposive sampling method was used to select eight (08) participants who were GWL from the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon. Purposive sampling is used in order to sample the opinions of participants who are versed with a topic and can provide in-depth information (Bryman, 2012). Given the researchers in-depth knowledge of the peacebuilding terrain in the two regions, purposive sampling was possible as the eight participants were known to be some of the most influential GWL in terms of number of activities carried out and social media followership.

The research was carried out between March and July 2020. Primary data collected through questionnaires were gotten in July 2020 while secondary data mined from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the respondents was limited to the period 2016 and July 2020.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze and synthesize all data gathered. Since the study already had predefined themes of interest (Cornelius-Ukpepi et al., 2015), a system of constant comparative coding was used to identify words and phrases that were related to the various themes. Data excerpts and screenshots were used to backup thematic areas. Demographic data and data collected from the social media accounts in terms of followership were presented in tables. The WhatsApp voice notes were transcribed for coding. The researcher and two other trained coders reviewed the biographic narratives from the open-ended questions as well as data collected from Facebook and Twitter posts from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the various respondents.

The sensitive nature of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon is such that civilians who fail to identify with the ideologies of either state forces (political and armed forces) or non-state armed groups are at risk of retaliation. However, given the apolitical stance of the participants and bearing in mind that the goal is also to give visibility to the works of these key informants, the University of Sussex consent form for project participants was provided and signed by all participants who gave their consent for their identities to be made public.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Participants' Organisational Profile

S/N	Name	Organisation	Position	Facebook Link	Twitter Link
1	Ramatu Abdu	Association for the Welfare of Women and Indigenous People (ASOWWIP)	Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/ramatuabdu78	https://twitter.com/RamatuAbdu1?s=08
2	Clotilda Andjensa Waah	Center For Advocacy in Gender Equality and Action for Development (CAGEAD)	Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/clotilda.andjensa https://www.facebook.com/4CAGEAD/	https://twitter.com/Center4advocac1?s=08
3	Yekpu Eleen Ndze	Beacon of Light Association (BeLA)	Founder and CEO	https://www.facebook.com/eleen.ndze https://www.facebook.com/belaassociation/	
4	Balkisou Buba	IDP-Goods/REPALEAC (Network of indigenous Peoples)	Vice National Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/balki.buba	https://twitter.com/BalkisouBuba?s=08
5	Obah Rosaline Akweba	Cameroon Community Media Network (CCMN) and Centre for Strategic Communication, Peacebuilding and Sustainable Development.	National Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/babyakj https://www.facebook.com/CCMN237/	https://twitter.com/OAkweba?s=08
6	Nadum Feka Parchibell	Hope for Vulnerables and Orphans (HOVO)	Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/fekaparchibell.essimi	https://twitter.com/NatachaNayoh?s=08
7	Sally Maforchi Mboumien	Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND) SW/NW Women's Task Force Cameroon	National Coordinator National Coordinator	https://www.facebook.com/comagend.cameroon https://www.facebook.com/SNWOT/	https://twitter.com/SallyMMboumien?s=08 https://twitter.com/Snwot4?s=08
8	Munteh Florence Chea	Hope For The Needy Association (HOFNA) Cameroon	Co-founder & Programs Manager	https://www.facebook.com/hofnacam/	https://twitter.com/HOFNACameroon

All eight participants returned completed questionnaires, and all had active social media accounts from where secondary data was sourced. The youngest participant was 36 years and the oldest 49. All eight participants underscored the importance of and rated their knowledge on UNSCR1325 on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being most knowledgeable. The lowest score was 06 and the highest 08. Though they were all aware of the existence of a CNAP and despite being some of the most prominent GWL from the NW /SW regions, none of them reported ever being consulted or involved in the process of developing the CNAP or implementing a project sponsored by the government under the auspices of the CNAP. This was reflected in stage six (06) of the methodology used in drafting the CNAP wherein national context was defined and limited to the Northern and East regions of Cameroon. Despite this lack of representation, the results found that these GWL were actively involved in the implementation of UNSCR1325 and peacebuilding in Cameroon. Through WEE, MHM and GBV prevention activities, they had collectively reached out **DIRECTLY** to over 60 000 women and children (mostly IDPs) and collectively had over 22 900 followers across their Facebook and Twitter accounts. Peace and peacebuilding were conceptualized to mean different things to the different women and this mostly centered around ensuring that communities especially women had basic needs such as food, water, shelter, menstrual hygiene products, respect of human rights and economic independence. The study equally found that though the women had the agency to implement locally tailored peacebuilding initiatives, they had little ownership over some of their project goals and outcomes as a result of difficulties in accessing funding and imposition from international donors.

Table 2: Participant's Social Media Followership.

S/N	Name	Facebook Followers	Twitter Followers	Total Followers
1	Ramatu Abdu / ASOWWIP	1356/145	63	1564
2	Clotilda Andjensa Waah /CAGEAD	2049/1166	456 / 312	3983
3	Yekpu Eleen Ndze / BeLA	1600/1964	65/60	3689
4	Balkisou Buba / IDP GOODS/ REPALEAC	1681/850/106	287 /45	2969
5	Obah Rosaline Akweba / CCMN	672	220	892
6	Nadum Feka Parchibell/ HOVO	2300	336	2636
7	Sally Maforchi Mboumien/ COMAGEND / SNWOT	966	746/ 362 / 327	2401
8	Munteh Florence Chea / HOFNA	1 000/3 424	349	4773
	Total			22 907

With a cumulative total number of 22 907 followers as at July 2020 on their Facebook and Twitter accounts, the participants underscored the role social media has played in their peace journeys, both positively and negatively. The study demonstrated that through social media, these women have sparked peace debates not just in the Anglophone regions but across the country.

Table 3. Number of Direct Beneficiaries from Participants Activities.

S/N	Name	GBV	MHM	Economic Empowerment	Total Direct Beneficiaries
1	Ramatu Abdu / ASOWWIP	200	200	100	500
2	Clotilda Andiansa Waah /CAGEAD	8 680	4 200	650	13 530
3	Yekpu Eleen Ndze / BeLA	150	2 500	215	2 865
4	Balkisou Buba / REPALEAC	80	50	440	570
5	Obah Rosaline Akweba / CCMN	0	0	0	0
6	Nadum Feka Parchibell/ HOVO	2 000	8 000	200	10 200
7	Sally Maforchi Mboumien/ COMAGEND / SNWOT	1 250	5 000	9 000	15 250
8	Muntsh Florence Chea / HOFNA	10 000	5 500	1 600	17 100
	Total	22 360	25 450	12 205	60 015

Table 3 shows that between September 2016 and July 2020 these GWL have collectively carried out GBV activities that have **DIRECTLY** reached 22 360 women, MHM for over 25 450 women and girls and WEE of over 12 205 women and girls.

DISCUSSION

Thematic discussion of the findings Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

The study affirmed the OCHA, June 2020 report that GBV did not only increase in the conflict affected regions, but in neighboring regions especially the West, Littoral and Center regions of Cameroon where a majority of internally displaced women and girls resettled. The study demonstrated that the GWL were actively involved in the implementation of UNSCR1325 in accordance to Paragraph 10 of UNSCR1325 and Outputs 2.2 & 2.3 of the CNAP. While paragraph 10 of UNSCR1325 calls for the protection of women and girls from all forms of GBV especially rape, outputs 2.2 & 2.3 of the CNAP pledges to ensure that those who survive sexual violence and GBV can have access to holistic care services including health, psychosocial, legal, judiciary, and economic services. From the study, all 08 participants through their grassroots organizations, individually and collectively undertook numerous activities to educate, sensitize and provide for women and girls suffering from or exposed to GBV.

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM)

The study found that these GWL undertook MHM activities that were in line with Output 3.1 paragraph XV of the CNAP which calls for the training and sensitization of women, girls and refugee families on menstrual hygiene. Feka through her organization -

HOVO, undertook a skill development and empowerment project for Internally Displaced women in MongoNdor village in Nguti sub division in the SW region. Over 50 grassroots women whose homes were completely burnt down due to the ongoing crisis were taught how to produce reusable sanitary pads for personal usage. Through the efforts of these GWL, the National Coalition on Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and the Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) for a rapid humanitarian action in the emergency areas in Cameroon (NACO-SRHR – MHM) was born. This was the first menstrual hygiene management and sexual and reproductive health rights coalition to exist in Cameroon.

By leading initiatives that address menstrual hygiene issues in the heart of a violent conflict, the efforts of these GWL support Enloe's (2000) assertion of peace being attained when women gain full control over their lives (and bodies) as well as Keskin & Keskin's (2009) conceptualization of peace as encompassing values such as physical and mental health. This also supports the essence of a human security perspective to make peacebuilding and implementation of UNSCR1325 sustainable, by paying attention to unfavorable "disruptions in the patterns of daily life" as well as ensuring safety from chronic threats of hunger and disease (UNDP, 1994) and every other

form of insecurity deemed at risk to individuals (Birik, 2014).

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE)

Thanks to international funding from organisations like the US Embassy in Cameroon, Lamp Light Center, MADRE, the German Embassy (Ambassade d'Allemagne), International Peace Foundation (IPF), International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), the participants have organized WEE programs that have trained over 50 000 women and girls especially IDPs. They have carried out projects such as AbleWomen (HOVO), the Promotion of Women Economic Empowerment and Rights (POWER) Project (HOFNA), restitution Workshop on the POWER Project (BeLA), and She Leads Peace (CAGEAD). Some of the projects were centered on the production of soap (HOFNA, CAGEAD, COMAGEND), distribution of sewing machines for face masks production during the COVID-19 (CAGEAD) as well as livelihood skill acquisition. ASSOWIP and IDP-Goods/REPALEAC (Network of indigenous Peoples) through Mbororo Cultural and Development Association (MBOSCUDA) were heavily involved in economic activities in favour of Mbororo women. HOVO identified and trained over 30 sex workers pushed into prostitution by the Anglophone crises for economic emancipation and set up a program to assist them recover.

By eliminating poverty and conditions that promote it as well as conditions that support GBV, the actions of these GWL resonate with the conceptualization of feminist peace by Pankhurst (2003) who holds that feminist peace requires, in addition to the nonexistence of armed conflicts or gender violence, the elimination of poverty and the circumstances that promote it. Their actions further support McKay's (2004) assertion that GWL peacebuilding efforts intrinsically pay attention to the oppression, marginalization and threatened security that women experience, while working towards establishing a peacebuilding agenda that involves women as key actors.

Social Media Activism (SMA)

A key feature of the SMA by the participants was the hashtags they used in reporting their different on-field activities. Ramatou Abdu of ASOWWIP engaged young Mbororo girls celebrating world's Menstruation Day 2020 with the hashtag #Bleedwithpride. Clothida of CAGEAD on the other hand used #PeriodsDoNotStopForPandemics to stress on MHM amidst the COVID-19 while Buba of REPALEAC posted #MenstruationMatters. Hashtags for GBV included #EndGBV, #NoToGBV and #orangetheworld which was eminent across all the

participants social media handles during the 16 and 40 days activism against GBV. It was common to come across hashtags related to their women-centered peacebuilding efforts such as #Fimivoices, #Women4Women, #SheBuildPeace, #StandWithWomenPeaceBuilders and #SNWOTforpeaceandjustice. The two indigenous Mbororo women participants (Abdu and Buba) decried the targeting of Mbororo communities in the two regions by stressing that the Anglophone crises is not an intertribal war using the hashtags #notointertribalwars.

CONCLUSION

The research findings answered the research questions by firstly underscoring that peace and hence peacebuilding is more of an analytical category meaning different things to different women. It was seen that the implementation of UNSCR1325 and sustainable peacebuilding in Cameroon is grounded on what peace means across cultures, race, class and gender. Secondly, the study clearly highlighted the key activities carried out by GWL to drive the implementation of UNSCR1325 and peacebuilding in Cameroon from a local perspective. In their local (yet less recognized) ways, Anglophone GWL are carrying out GBV, MHM, WEE and Social Media activities that are contributing to sustainable peacebuilding in Cameroon by using their local know how and capacities in their different cultural contexts. Their actions confirm that local ownership in peacebuilding based on self-determination, non-imposition and involvement of local actors boosts durability and sustainability of peacebuilding (Ejdu, 2016), and transforms the peacebuilding landscape.

The study further demonstrated the limited extent to which GWL were officially involved by the government in the peacebuilding process and implementation of the CNAP through their work. The study found that though the CNAP output 1.3. paragraphs x and xiii aims for a 30% inclusion of women especially those affected by conflict at political dialogues and negotiation tables, only 15% of women participated during the Major National Dialogue (Jay, 2019). Likewise, none of the participants' activities had been funded by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family which is the government body in charge of implementing the CNAP. Considering the extensive peacebuilding activities the participants having been carrying out personally and through their organisations, as demonstrated throughout this study, the findings confirm the assertion by Ringera (2007), that in times of war, even though they are prevented from participating in decision making processes, women form groups that contribute to peacebuilding.

It was recommended that peacebuilding should not be viewed around what it can do for grassroots women, but rather what they are doing and can do for peacebuilding. Gaps such as administrative bottle necks and limited access to funding that continue to play down on their work should be eliminated. Even though, the templates of funders and their expectations are sometimes too technical and imposed on grassroots women, grassroots women know what their communities need. The researcher thus posits that, if grassroots women leaders' actions from the local levels continue to shape the global picture of UNSCR1325 as well as funding priorities and not the other way round, the big picture of sustainable peace would surely be arrived at.

Given that the participants reported that the lack of visibility to their peacebuilding efforts, future research is recommended to uncover how best to enable/support these women-leaders own and tell such stories. Since the study has equally underscored the importance of human needs and human processes in achieving sustainable peace, it was also recommended that further research be carried out to investigate the different local human needs that drive peacebuilding in Cameroon across different local communities and regions.

The researcher strongly recommended that, a more inclusive and representative CNAP should be developed that extensively includes the participation of grassroots women-leaders from the Anglophone regions and all other regions of the country. The researcher further recommended the development of "Local Action Plans" (LAPs) tailored towards the needs of different communities that will more likely lead to a better implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Cameroon and the overall participation of women in the peacebuilding process in Cameroon at a time when the country is facing peace and security issues from all angles of its national territory.

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