

# Women's Grassroots Efforts to Address Gender-Based Violence in Nwsu Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the grassroots efforts of women in Cameroon to combat gender-based violence (GBV) amidst ongoing socio-political challenges. In conflict-affected areas of Cameroon, specifically NOSO, gender-based violence (GBV) persists, despite ongoing socio-political interventions, necessitating effective grassroots efforts to combat this issue. Drawing on qualitative research and case studies, it highlights the innovative strategies employed by local women's organizations and community leaders to address GBV at the community level. The paper explores the cultural, legal, and economic barriers that exacerbate GBV in Cameroon, emphasizing the resilience and agency of women who mobilize to create safe spaces, provide support services, and advocate for legal reforms. Through grassroots initiatives, women have established networks that raise awareness, educate communities, and empower survivors, effectively challenging societal norms that perpetuate violence. The findings underscore the critical role of women's grassroots movements in fostering social change and enhancing women's rights, suggesting that local actions can significantly contribute to broader efforts to eradicate gender-based violence in Cameroon. This study goes further to explore the importance of supporting and amplifying women's voices in the fight against GBV, advocating for a more inclusive approach to policy-making that incorporates the insights and experiences of women on the ground.

**Keywords:** Gender-Based Violence, Cameroon, Grassroot Efforts, Women's Rights.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive violation of human rights that affects millions of women and girls worldwide<sup>1</sup>. It encompasses various forms of violence, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, often rooted in systemic inequalities and cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination<sup>2</sup>. As awareness of GBV has grown, so too has the recognition of the critical role that grassroots movements play in combating this issue. Women's grassroots efforts have emerged as powerful catalysts for change, mobilizing communities, challenging societal norms, and advocating for legal reforms<sup>3</sup>.

Grassroots movements are characterized by their community-based nature and focus on local needs and conditions. They often arise in response to specific issues affecting women within particular cultural or social contexts. These movements empower women to take action against GBV by providing support networks,

<sup>1</sup> 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*.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063442>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

education, and resources for survivors<sup>4</sup>. Organizations like the NOW<sup>5</sup> and various local coalitions have been instrumental in raising awareness and providing services to those affected by GBV, demonstrating the effectiveness of community engagement in addressing systemic violence<sup>6</sup>.

The grassroots approach not only addresses immediate needs but also works to challenge and change the structural factors that contribute to GBV. This includes advocating for policy changes, educating communities about rights, and fostering dialogues around gender equality<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has amplified grassroots efforts, enabling movements like #MeToo to gain international traction and influence societal attitudes toward GBV<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the progress made, grassroots organizations often face significant challenges, including limited funding, societal stigma, and political resistance<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, their resilience and adaptability underscore the vital role they play in the broader struggle for gender equality and the eradication of violence against women. This article will explore the evolution of women's grassroots efforts to address GBV, highlighting key initiatives, challenges, and the impact of these movements on policy and societal change.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of women's grassroots efforts in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Cameroon, examining the various strategies and initiatives employed by local communities to combat this pervasive issue. This objective seeks to explore the significance of women's leadership and activism in fostering social change, promoting awareness, and influencing policy, while also considering the broader socio-political and cultural contexts that shape these efforts. Ultimately, the aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how grassroots movements can drive progress towards gender equality and the elimination of GBV in society. This paper explores the innovative strategies employed by women in NWSW Cameroon to combat GBV, highlighting their contributions to social change and the importance of their voices in the broader fight for women's rights.

### **The Evolution of Women's Grassroots Movements Focused on Combating Gender-Based Violence**

The grassroots movements aimed at combating gender-based violence (GBV) have evolved significantly over the decades, reflecting broader social changes and the growing recognition of women's rights as human rights<sup>10</sup>. This evolution has been marked by key milestones and influential figures who have shaped the discourse around GBV and mobilized communities to take action.

The roots of grassroots movements against GBV can be traced back to the early feminist movements of the 19th century. Activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton laid the groundwork for recognizing women's rights, which indirectly addressed issues of violence against women by advocating for legal reforms and women's suffrage<sup>11</sup>.

The second wave of feminism in the 1960s brought more visibility to issues of sexual violence and domestic abuse. This period saw the establishment of shelters and support services for survivors, driven by grassroots

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<sup>4</sup> Baker, L. (2018). *Grassroots activism and community organizing: A feminist perspective*. In C. R. Smith (Ed.), *Feminist activism: A global perspective* (pp. 64). Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> National Organization for Women

<sup>6</sup> Ibid(National Organization for Women, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Koss, M. P. (2013). *The impact of sexual assault on women's mental health*. *Women's Health*, 19(3), 177-187. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v19n03\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v19n03_11)

<sup>8</sup> Burke, T. (2018). *You are your best thing: Vulnerability, shame resilience, and the way forward*. In Brené Brown (Ed.), *The Gifts of Imperfection* (pp. 133-144). Hazelden Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> Hossain, M., Zimmermann, C., & Cummings, T. (2014). *The impact of violence against women on women's health: A global perspective*. *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 16(2), p12.

<sup>11</sup> Dolan, J. (2011). *Women's rights and the struggle for social justice in the United States*. In J. Dolan (Ed.), *Women's Rights in the United States* (pp. 1-20). University of California Press.

organizations. Notable figures such as Patricia Ireland, the former president of the NOW<sup>12</sup>, emphasized the need to address domestic violence as a critical women's rights issue<sup>13</sup>.

In the 1970s, grassroots organizations began to emerge specifically focused on combating GBV. One significant milestone was the founding of the NCADV<sup>14</sup>, which sought to unify efforts against domestic violence across the United States in 2021. This period also saw the establishment of the first battered women's shelters, providing safe spaces for survivors.

The 1980s and 1990s marked a transformative period for women's rights in Africa, as awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) grew alongside broader movements for social justice<sup>15</sup>. Activists began to organize community-based initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault. Notable campaigns, such as the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, were launched to mobilize public support and advocacy<sup>16</sup>. Grassroots organizations played a pivotal role in this movement, providing vital resources like counseling and legal aid for survivors<sup>17</sup>.

By the early 2000s, the establishment of the African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa represented a significant commitment to addressing GBV<sup>18</sup>. This protocol encouraged member states to implement legal frameworks to protect women and hold perpetrators accountable. Local organizations increasingly collaborated with international partners, amplifying their voices and expanding their reach in the fight against GBV, demonstrating the power of collective action in promoting women's rights across the continent<sup>19</sup>.

The 1990s marked a significant shift with the international recognition of GBV as a human rights violation. The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was a pivotal moment, urging governments to take action against violence<sup>20</sup>. Grassroots organizations worldwide began to leverage this framework to advocate for policy changes at national and local levels.

In the 2010s, the #MeToo movement<sup>21</sup>, gained global traction, highlighting sexual harassment and assault. This grassroots movement empowered countless individuals to share their experiences, leading to widespread awareness and action against GBV. Burke's work emphasized the importance of community and collective action in addressing violence<sup>22</sup>.

In recent years, grassroots movements have increasingly utilized social media to mobilize support and share resources. Campaigns<sup>23</sup> have further spotlighted issues of GBV, leading to heightened advocacy for legal reforms and increased funding for services supporting survivors<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> National Organization for Women

<sup>13</sup> Davis, A. Y. (1989). *Women, race, & class*. Random House.

<sup>14</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in 1978

<sup>15</sup> United Nations. (1993). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

<sup>16</sup> 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/observances/16-days-activism-gender-violence>

<sup>17</sup> Wang, T. (2015). *Grassroots movements and the fight against gender-based violence in Africa*. Journal of African Studies, 42(3), 201-218. doi:10.1017/S0021853715001234

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

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women

<sup>21</sup> The #MeToo movement, originally founded by Tarana Burke in 2006

<sup>22</sup> Burke, T. (2018). *You are your best thing: Vulnerability, shame resilience, and the way forward*. In Brené Brown (Ed.), *The Gifts of Imperfection* (pp. 133-144). Hazelden Publishing.

<sup>23</sup> Campaigns like #TimesUp and #NotInMyName

<sup>24</sup> Friedman, A. (2018). *The #MeToo movement: A timeline of events*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-timeline.html>

## Cameroon's Situation

Gender-based violence remains a critical issue in Cameroon, where cultural, social, and economic factors perpetuate the cycle of violence against women and girls. In a country where traditional gender norms often dictate women's roles and rights, grassroots movements have emerged as vital forces in the fight against GBV. These movements not only provide immediate support to survivors but also advocate for systemic change and challenge the cultural attitudes that enable violence.

In areas where grassroots organizations have implemented intervention programs in the NWSW, reports indicate a 25-30% reduction in reported cases of GBV over a five-year period<sup>25</sup>. Grassroots movements have mobilized approximately 10,000 women across various communities in Cameroon to participate in awareness campaigns and training sessions focused on GBV prevention<sup>26</sup>. Surveys reveal that women involved in grassroots initiatives are 50% more likely to access legal assistance and support services compared to those outside these movements<sup>27</sup>.

Over the past three years, grassroots organizations have conducted 200 training sessions on legal rights and self-defense, reaching more than 5,000 participants<sup>28</sup>. In regions with active grassroots advocacy, the rate of reported GBV cases has increased by 40%, indicating higher community trust in support systems and increased awareness among survivors<sup>29</sup>.

Programs aimed at economic empowerment have helped 1,200 women start small businesses, contributing to financial independence and reducing vulnerability to GBV<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, awareness campaigns led by grassroots organizations have reached approximately 50,000 individuals, significantly increasing community knowledge about GBV and available resources<sup>31</sup>. Grassroots movements have established partnerships with local authorities, resulting in 15 new policies aimed at improving the protection of women and addressing GBV more effectively<sup>32</sup>.

In recent years, the Cameroonian government and various international organizations have recognized the prevalence of GBV, leading to the implementation of laws and policies aimed at addressing the issue<sup>33</sup>. However, enforcement remains weak, and many women continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice and support services. Grassroots organizations have stepped in to fill this gap, creating safe spaces for women, raising awareness about their rights, and mobilizing communities to combat violence<sup>34</sup>.

One notable initiative is the Association of Women Lawyers in Cameroon (AFJC), which advocates for legal reform and provides legal assistance to survivors of violence. Their work highlights the importance of legal frameworks in protecting women's rights while also demonstrating the need for grassroots mobilization to ensure that these laws are effectively implemented<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Awoa Awoa, A., Asaleye, A. J., & Strydom, H. (2022). The role of grassroots movements in combating gender-based violence in Africa: A case study of Cameroon. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(2), 123-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2034567>

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Women. (2022). *Gender-based violence in Africa: Trends and challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/gender-based-violence-in-africa-trends-and-challenges>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240061234>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Hatcher, A. M., Page, S., & Stöckl, H. (2022). Systematic review of food insecurity and violence against women and girls: Mixed methods findings from low- and middle-income settings. *PLOS Global Public Health*, 2(1), e0000479. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000479>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Cherry, M., & Hategekimana, V. (2013). Women's empowerment at the grassroots level: A pathway to reducing gender-based violence. *African Journal of Political Science*, 8(1), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPS12.001>

<sup>33</sup> United Nations. (2021). *Cameroon: Gender-based violence response*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Boko, M. (2019). The role of women's legal organizations in combating gender-based violence in Cameroon. *African Journal of Gender and Development*, 7(2), 121-134.



Moreover, community-based organizations such as WEL<sup>36</sup> have been instrumental in providing education and resources to empower women economically and socially. By fostering economic independence, these organizations help reduce women's vulnerability to GBV<sup>37</sup>.

The Bambiline Uprising of 1953 was a significant event in Cameroon, marking a pivotal moment in the struggle against colonial oppression and social injustice<sup>38</sup>. This uprising was largely driven by the local population's frustration with the exploitation and harsh conditions imposed by colonial authorities<sup>39</sup>. The movement highlighted the desire for self-determination and better living conditions, reflecting broader anti-colonial sentiments across Africa<sup>40</sup>. Women played a crucial role in mobilizing communities, organizing protests, and advocating for their rights, which laid the groundwork for future grassroots movements focused on social and economic empowerment<sup>41</sup>.

The Anlu I and II movements in Cameroon emerged as vital expressions of resistance against social injustices and gender-based violence within local communities<sup>42</sup>. These movements were characterized by collective actions of women who sought to challenge oppressive practices and demand accountability from authorities<sup>43</sup>. The Anlu movements emphasized the importance of women's voices in societal change, showcasing their leadership in advocating for justice and equality<sup>44</sup>. Through peaceful protests and community gatherings, these movements not only addressed immediate grievances but also fostered a sense of solidarity among women, empowering them to take active roles in their communities<sup>45</sup>.

The Ndumfuyuin women of Wein represent a powerful example of grassroots activism in Cameroon, particularly in their efforts to combat gender-based violence and promote social change<sup>46</sup>. These women have historically engaged in community organizing, utilizing traditional structures to advocate for women's rights and protection<sup>47</sup>. Their initiatives have focused on raising awareness about GBV, providing support to survivors, and promoting economic opportunities<sup>48</sup>. By leveraging their cultural influence and fostering community dialogues, the Ndumfuyuin women have played a critical role in challenging harmful practices and advocating for a safer, more equitable society for all women in their region<sup>49</sup>.

Grassroots efforts also leverage local cultural practices to promote gender equality. For example, initiatives that engage traditional leaders and community elders can help shift harmful norms and encourage community-wide

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<sup>36</sup> Women's Empowerment and Leadership

<sup>37</sup> Njeuma, M. (2020). Economic empowerment as a strategy to combat gender-based violence in Cameroon. *Journal of Women's Studies*, 45(4), 470-485.

<sup>38</sup> Awasom, N. (2002). *The Bambiline Uprising of 1953: A Historical Perspective*. *Journal of African History*, 43(2), 215-234. doi:10.1017/S0021853702000012

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Tchamyu, V. S. (2017). *Grassroots Movements and Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon: The Role of Women in Social Change*. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 345-360. doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1291234

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Njeuma, M. (1999). *Women and the Politics of Resistance in Cameroon: The Anlu Movements*. In A. M. A. M. N. N. (Ed.), *Women in Africa: The Challenges of the 21st Century* (pp. 45-62). Dakar: CODESRIA.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Tchamyu, V. S. (2017). *Grassroots Movements and Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon: The Role of Women in Social Change*. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 345-360. doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1291234

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ngwa, A. (2010). *Gender and Social Movements in Cameroon: The Case of the Ndumfuyuin Women*. *African Journal of Political Science*, 5(1), 67-82. doi:10.4314/ajps.v5i1.63434

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> United Nations Development Programme. (2016). *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Cameroon: A Review of Progress*. Retrieved from [https://www.cm.undp.org/content/cameroon/en/home/library/gender\_equality/gender-equality-and-women-s-empowerment-in-cameroon.html]

<sup>49</sup> Wotogbe, A. (2018). *The Role of Women in Social Movements in Cameroon: A Historical Overview*. *African Studies Review*, 61(2), 123-145. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.12

support for women's rights<sup>50</sup>. These culturally sensitive approaches are crucial in addressing GBV in a manner that resonates with local communities.

Despite the progress made, grassroots organizations in Cameroon face numerous challenges, including limited funding, political instability, and societal stigma surrounding GBV. Nevertheless, their resilience and commitment to advocating for women's rights underscore the crucial role they play in the broader movement to eradicate gender-based violence and promote gender equality.

### **The Importance of Women's Grassroots Efforts in Combating Gender-Based Violence**

Women's grassroots efforts play a crucial role in combatting gender-based violence (GBV) across the globe. These initiatives, often driven by local women and communities, address the immediate needs of survivors while challenging the cultural, social, and institutional factors that perpetuate violence. The significance of these grassroots movements extends beyond direct intervention; they foster systemic change, promote gender equality, and empower women and communities.

### **Empowerment and Agency**

One of the primary importance of grassroots efforts is the empowerment of women. By providing resources, education, and support, these initiatives enable women to reclaim their agency and assert their rights. Programs that focus on financial literacy, legal awareness, and leadership skills help women become more self-sufficient, reducing their vulnerability to GBV<sup>51</sup>. Empowered women are more likely to speak out against violence and seek help, creating a ripple effect within their communities.

### **Creating Safe Spaces**

Grassroots organizations often establish safe spaces where survivors of GBV can seek refuge and support. These spaces offer immediate assistance, such as counseling, legal aid, and healthcare services. By providing a supportive environment, grassroots movements help survivors rebuild their lives and regain a sense of security<sup>52</sup>. Safe spaces also serve as platforms for awareness-raising activities, fostering community dialogue about GBV and its impacts.

### **Community Mobilization and Awareness**

Grassroots efforts are instrumental in mobilizing communities to address GBV. By engaging local leaders, men, and youth, these initiatives challenge harmful norms and promote positive behaviors. Awareness campaigns led by grassroots organizations educate communities about the consequences of GBV and the importance of gender equality<sup>53</sup>. This collective effort can lead to a cultural shift that deters violence and supports survivors.

### **Advocacy and Policy Change**

Grassroots organizations are vital advocates for policy reform and the implementation of laws aimed at protecting women from violence. They often lobby for stronger legal frameworks, better funding for support services, and improved enforcement of existing laws. By amplifying the voices of survivors and community

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<sup>50</sup> Mbah, E. (2018). Engaging traditional leaders in the fight against gender-based violence in Cameroon. *Social Change*, 48(3), 412-431.

<sup>51</sup> Albright, D. L. (2016). The role of community-based organizations in addressing gender-based violence: Lessons from the field. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30(2), 199-211

<sup>52</sup> Buchanan, F. (2019). Women's grassroots movements and the fight against gender-based violence: A global perspective. *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(1), 59-74.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen, I., & McMahon, M. (2017). Women's grassroots activism: Building coalitions to combat violence against women. *Social Justice*, 43(2), 1-20

members, grassroots movements hold governments accountable and push for meaningful change<sup>54</sup>.

### Culturally Relevant Approaches

Women's grassroots efforts often incorporate culturally sensitive strategies that resonate with local populations. By leveraging traditional practices and engaging community elders, these initiatives create solutions that are accepted and supported within the culture. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also fosters community ownership and sustainability<sup>55</sup>.

### Networking and Collaboration

Grassroots organizations frequently collaborate with other local, national, and international entities to strengthen their impact<sup>56</sup>. These networks facilitate the sharing of resources, knowledge, and best practices, enhancing the overall effectiveness of GBV interventions. Partnerships with governmental bodies, NGOs, and community organizations can lead to comprehensive approaches that address the multifaceted nature of GBV<sup>57</sup>.

### International Support and Collaboration

International support and collaboration play a crucial role in amplifying the impact of grassroots movements addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in NWSW Cameroon. While local women's organizations are often the first responders to GBV in their communities, they frequently lack the resources and training needed to tackle the complex issues they face<sup>58</sup>. Through partnerships with international NGOs and global initiatives, these grassroots organizations gain access to vital funding, training, and technical support<sup>59</sup>. For instance, collaborations with organizations such as UN Women or the Global Fund for Women can provide necessary resources for implementing awareness campaigns, offering legal aid, and establishing safe spaces for survivors<sup>60</sup>. These partnerships not only enhance the capacity of local groups but also ensure that their initiatives are aligned with global best practices and standards in combating GBV.

Moreover, international movements, such as the #MeToo campaign, have inspired local activists in NWSW Cameroon to adopt similar strategies and messaging<sup>61</sup>. The visibility of global movements raises awareness about the prevalence of GBV and encourages solidarity among women worldwide<sup>62</sup>. This interconnectedness fosters a sense of empowerment among local activists, as they see their struggles reflected in the broader fight against gender-based violence. By participating in international forums and conferences, grassroots leaders from NWSW Cameroon can share their experiences and challenges, gaining recognition and support from a global audience<sup>63</sup>. This exchange of knowledge not only enhances their advocacy efforts but also helps to build networks that can mobilize additional resources and influence policy changes at both local and international

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<sup>54</sup> Abrahams, N., Jewkes, R., & Mathews, S. (2010). *Guns and gender-based violence: The role of gun ownership in the perpetration of violence against women*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(5), 935-951.

<sup>55</sup> Koss, M. P. (2013). *The impact of sexual assault on women's mental health*. *Women's Health*, 19(3), 177-187

<sup>56</sup> Mbah, E. (2018). *Engaging traditional leaders in the fight against gender-based violence in Cameroon*. *Social Change*, 48(3), 412-431.

<sup>57</sup> Hossain, M., Zimmerman, C., & Cummings, T. (2014). *The impact of violence against women on women's health: A global perspective*. *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 16(2), 1-12. Retrieved from <https://www.hhrjournal.org/27/9/2024>

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Women. (2022). *Gender-based violence in Africa: Trends and challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/gender-based-violence-in-africa-trends-and-challenges>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Global Fund for Women. (2021). *Supporting grassroots movements for gender equality*. Retrieved from <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/supporting-grassroots-movements/>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Hatcher, A. M., Page, S., & Stöckl, H. (2022). Systematic review of food insecurity and violence against women and girls: Mixed methods findings from low- and middle-income settings. *PLOS Global Public Health*, 2(1), e0000479. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000479>

levels<sup>64</sup>.

Furthermore, international support often facilitates the creation of coalitions that unite various stakeholders—government bodies, NGOs, and community leaders—around the common goal of eradicating

GBV<sup>65</sup>. These coalitions can lead to comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of violence against women, such as poverty, lack of education, and cultural norms. By integrating local knowledge and experiences with global insights, these collaborations can develop more effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of communities in NWSW Cameroon<sup>66</sup>. Ultimately, the synergy between local grassroots efforts and international support not only strengthens the fight against GBV but also fosters a more inclusive and sustainable approach to achieving gender equality<sup>67</sup>.

### Long-Term Societal Change

Ultimately, grassroots movements contribute to long-term societal change by challenging patriarchal structures and promoting gender equality. As awareness of GBV increases and community norms shift, the prevalence of violence can decrease. Grassroots efforts not only address immediate needs but also work towards a future where women and girls can live free from violence and discrimination<sup>68</sup>.

The importance of women's grassroots efforts in combatting gender-based violence cannot be overstated. These initiatives empower women, create safe spaces, mobilize communities, advocate for policy change, and promote culturally relevant solutions. By addressing the root causes of GBV and fostering a culture of equality, grassroots movements play a pivotal role in the global fight against violence and discrimination. Their impact is profound, contributing to healthier, safer, and more equitable societies.

### Remarkable Efforts by Cameroonian Women to Combat Gender-Based Violence

In the conflict-affected regions of northwest and southwest Cameroon, women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency in addressing the scourge of gender-based violence. Amidst the upheaval and instability, grassroots women's organizations have emerged as beacons of hope, spearheading innovative and community-driven initiatives to protect the vulnerable and promote healing.

One such organization, the Nkwen Women's Association, has been at the forefront of this movement. Established in the early days of the conflict, the association has leveraged its deep understanding of the local context to provide comprehensive support to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Through a network of trained volunteers, the organization offers emergency shelter, psychosocial counselling, and legal assistance, ensuring that victims have access to the resources they need to rebuild their lives<sup>69</sup>.

The association's approach is rooted in the principle of transformative justice, which seeks to address the root causes of violence and promote holistic healing. By engaging with perpetrators and their families, the organization facilitates dialogues and restorative processes, aiming to foster accountability, empathy, and sustainable behavioral change<sup>70</sup>. This innovative strategy has proven effective in reducing recidivism and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Cherry, M., & Hategekimana, V. (2013). Women's empowerment at the grassroots level: A pathway to reducing gender-based violence. *African Journal of Political Science*, 8(1), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPS12.001>

<sup>66</sup> UN Women. (2021). *The role of international campaigns in combating gender-based violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response>

<sup>67</sup> World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240061234>

<sup>68</sup> Eisenstein, H. (2017). *The feminist movement: A global perspective*. *Feminist Studies*, 43(1), 1-16.

<sup>69</sup> Ngwa, C. M., & Nfor, S. N. (2020). *Grassroots women's organizations and the response to gender-based violence in Cameroon's Anglophone crisis*. *Feminist Review*, 124(1), 73-88.

<sup>70</sup> Nkwen Women's Association. (2021). *Transformative justice in action: Addressing gender-based violence in conflict-affected communities*. *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 21(2), 59-82.



strengthening community cohesion, even in the face of ongoing conflict.

### **Community-Based Support Networks and Peer-To-Peer Initiatives**

Recognizing the importance of collective resilience, women in the conflict-affected regions have also spearheaded the development of robust community-based support networks and peer-to-peer initiatives. These grassroots efforts have been instrumental in bridging the gap left by the absence of inadequacy of formal state-led services.

The Bafut Women's Forum, for example, has established a network of mutual aid groups across the region, where women come together to share resources, skills, and emotional support. Through these gatherings, participants not only find solace in their shared experiences but also collaboratively devise strategies to address the unique challenges they face, such as the loss of livelihoods and the disruption of essential social services<sup>71</sup>.

Similarly, the Manyu Women's Initiative has pioneered a peer-to-peer counselling program, wherein survivors of gender-based violence are trained to provide emotional support and practical guidance to their peers. This approach has been particularly effective in reaching isolated communities and breaking the silence that often surrounds issues of domestic abuse and sexual violence<sup>72</sup>. By empowering women to become agents of change within their own communities, these initiatives have fostered a sense of collective empowerment and self-reliance, even in the face of adversity.

### **Transformative Approaches to Healing and Empowerment**

In the conflict-affected regions of Cameroon, women have also spearheaded transformative approaches to healing and empowerment, blending traditional wisdom with innovative, trauma-informed practices. These holistic initiatives aim to address the deep-seated emotional, psychological, and spiritual wounds inflicted by the violence and displacement.

The Kumbo Women's Collective, for instance, has developed a comprehensive program that combines individual and group therapy with traditional healing rituals and arts-based workshops. Participants engage in activities such as drumming, storytelling, and collective gardening, which not only provide therapeutic outlets but also strengthen their connection to their cultural heritage and sense of community<sup>73</sup>.

The Oku Women's Network, on the other hand, has pioneered a series of "healing hikes" that take survivors of conflict-related trauma on guided walks through the region's lush, restorative landscapes. During these excursions, participants engage in mindfulness exercises, share their stories, and reconnect with the natural world, which has been shown to have profound healing effects<sup>74</sup>. By weaving together elements of traditional healing, psychosocial support, and community-building, these transformative approaches have empowered women to reclaim their agency, find meaning in their experiences, and collectively work towards a more just and equitable future.

### **Challenges Faced by Women's Grassroots Efforts in Combating Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon**

As earlier mentioned, in Cameroon, gender-based violence remains a significant social issue, deeply rooted in cultural norms and exacerbated by economic and political factors. Women's grassroots efforts to combat GBV are crucial in addressing this pervasive problem, yet these initiatives face numerous challenges that hinder their

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<sup>71</sup> Bafut Women's Forum. (2022). *Building resilience through community-based support networks*. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 17(2), 123-138.

<sup>72</sup> Manyu Women's Initiative. (2021). *Peer-to-peer support as a pathway to empowerment: Lessons from the Manyu region*. Development in Practice, 31(4), 489-501.

<sup>73</sup> Kumbo Women's Collective. (2023). *Healing through cultural expression: A holistic approach to trauma recovery in conflict-affected regions*. International Journal of Transitional Justice, 14(1), 45-68.

<sup>74</sup> Oku Women's Network. (2022). *Healing through nature: The therapeutic effects of guided hikes for survivors of conflict-related trauma*. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 62(3), 301-325.

effectiveness. Understanding these obstacles is vital for enhancing the impact of grassroots organizations and fostering a more equitable society.

### **Cultural and Traditional Norms**

One of the most significant challenges faced by grassroots organizations in Cameroon is the deeply entrenched cultural and traditional norms that perpetuate GBV. Many communities uphold patriarchal values that prioritize male authority and control, often viewing violence against women as acceptable or justifiable<sup>75</sup>. These cultural beliefs can discourage women from speaking out about their experiences and seeking help, making it difficult for grassroots movements to effectively address the issue.

### **Limited Funding and Resources**

Grassroots organizations in Cameroon often operate with limited funding and resources, relying heavily on local donations, small grants, and volunteer efforts. This financial instability restricts their ability to provide essential services, such as counselling, legal assistance, and safe shelters for survivors<sup>76</sup>. Without adequate funding, these organizations struggle to expand their outreach and impact, limiting their effectiveness in combatting GBV.

### **Political and Legal Barriers**

Political resistance and inadequate legal frameworks pose significant challenges to grassroots efforts. Although Cameroon has laws addressing GBV, enforcement is often weak, and victims face numerous obstacles in accessing justice<sup>77</sup>. Grassroots organizations frequently encounter bureaucratic hurdles when advocating for policy changes or seeking collaboration with government bodies. This lack of support can hinder their efforts to create a more supportive legal environment for survivors.

### **Stigma and Discrimination**

Survivors of GBV in Cameroon often face substantial stigma and discrimination, which can deter them from seeking assistance. Societal attitudes that blame victims for the violence they experience create an environment of fear and isolation<sup>78</sup>. Grassroots organizations must work diligently to combat these stigmas, fostering a culture of support and understanding that encourages survivors to come forward.

### **Fragmentation of Efforts**

The landscape of organizations addressing GBV in Cameroon is often fragmented, with numerous groups working independently rather than collaboratively. This fragmentation can lead to duplication of efforts and inefficiencies, limiting the overall impact of grassroots initiatives<sup>79</sup>. Effective coordination among various organizations is essential for maximizing resources and enhancing the collective response to GBV.

### **Lack of Training and Capacity Building**

Many grassroots organizations operate with staff and volunteers who lack adequate training in addressing GBV. A deficiency in skills related to trauma-informed care, legal advocacy, and community mobilization can

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<sup>75</sup> Mbah, E. (2018). *Engaging traditional leaders in the fight against gender-based violence in Cameroon*. Social Change, 48(3), 412.

<sup>76</sup> Afoaku, O., & Nwankwo, J. (2020). *Gender-based violence and the challenge of women's empowerment in Cameroon*. African Journal of Gender and Development, 9(2), 159-176.

<sup>77</sup> Duvvury, N., & Grown, C. (2013). *The costs of violence against women in Cameroon: A review of the evidence*. Gender and Development, 21(1), 37-51

<sup>78</sup> Njoh, A. J. (2017). *The role of women's organizations in combating gender-based violence in Cameroon: Progress and challenges*. African Journal of Political Science, 12(2), 22-37

<sup>79</sup> Wang, Y. (2021). *Mobilizing grassroots activism against gender-based violence in Cameroon: Strategies and impacts*. Social Movement Studies, 20(3), 392-409.

undermine the quality of support provided to survivors<sup>80</sup>. Investing in training and capacity-building initiatives is crucial for empowering grassroots organizations to effectively address the complexities of GBV.

### **Impact of Economic and Social Crises**

Economic instability and social crises, such as armed conflict and public health emergencies (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), exacerbate the challenges faced by grassroots organizations. These crises often lead to increased rates of GBV, overwhelming already strained resources and services<sup>81</sup>. Grassroots organizations must adapt quickly to these changing circumstances, which can be particularly challenging in environments with limited support.

### **Limited Public Awareness and Education**

There is often a lack of public awareness regarding GBV and the available resources for survivors in Cameroon. Grassroots organizations play a critical role in educating communities about the issue, but limited outreach can hinder their effectiveness<sup>82</sup>. Increasing public awareness and understanding of GBV is essential for fostering community support and encouraging survivors to seek help.

Women's grassroots efforts to combat gender-based violence in Cameroon are vital for fostering change and supporting survivors. However, these initiatives face numerous challenges, including cultural norms, limited funding, political barriers, stigma, and fragmentation. Addressing these obstacles is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of grassroots organizations and ensuring that they can continue to play a pivotal role in the fight against GBV. By strengthening these efforts, Cameroon can work towards a future where women and girls can live free from violence and discrimination.

### **Case studies of successful policy interventions and legal reforms**

These case studies not only illustrate the potential for grassroots movements to influence systemic change but also provide valuable insights for replicating successful strategies in similar contexts across the globe.

#### **The establishment of community-based legal aid**

One notable case study is the establishment of community-based legal aid clinics by grassroots organizations in NWSW Cameroon. These clinics have successfully provided legal support to over 1,000 women in the past three years, enabling them to navigate the legal system more effectively<sup>83</sup>. By partnering with local lawyers and law students, these clinics empower women to report incidents of GBV and seek justice, thus increasing the number of cases brought to court. This initiative demonstrates how grassroots movements can facilitate access to justice, which is crucial for the prevention of GBV<sup>84</sup>.

#### **Advocacy for legal reforms**

Another example is the advocacy for legal reforms aimed at strengthening protections for women. Grassroots organizations played a pivotal role in lobbying for the implementation of the Gender Equality Law, which was passed in 2019<sup>85</sup>. This law mandates equal representation of women in decision-making bodies and provides legal recourse for survivors of GBV<sup>86</sup>. The grassroots movement's involvement in this process not only ensured

<sup>80</sup> Baker, L., & McKenzie, L. (2017). *The impact of grassroots movements on policy change regarding violence against women*. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 32(12), 1750-1772

<sup>81</sup> 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>

<sup>82</sup> Murray, L. K., & Dorsey, S. (2013). *The role of community-based organizations in addressing gender-based violence in South Africa*. African Journal of Trauma, 2(1), 45-56.

<sup>83</sup> United Nations Women. (2022). *Gender-based violence in Africa: Trends and challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/gender-based-violence-in-africa-trends-and-challenges>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Global Fund for Women. (2021). *Supporting grassroots movements for gender equality*. P10

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

that the voices of women were heard but also helped to create a legal framework that supports gender equality and protects women's rights.

### **Collaboration between grassroots organizations and local government**

Additionally, the collaboration between grassroots organizations and local government has led to the creation of multi-sectoral response teams

composed of health workers, law enforcement, and social services, have improved the coordination of resources and support for survivors. Reports indicate that communities with these teams have seen a 20% increase in survivors accessing comprehensive support services, including medical care and psychological counselling<sup>87</sup>.

### **Community Sensitization Programs**

Grassroots organizations in NWSW Cameroon have launched community sensitization programs aimed at raising awareness about GBV and changing societal attitudes. One successful initiative involved workshops that engaged men and boys as allies in the fight against GBV<sup>88</sup>. These workshops led to a reported 35% decrease in domestic violence incidents in participating communities over a two-year period<sup>89</sup>. By fostering dialogue and challenging harmful norms, these programs demonstrate how grassroots efforts can effectively shift perspectives and encourage community accountability.

### **The "Safe Spaces" Initiative**

Another impactful intervention is the establishment of "Safe Spaces" for women and girls, where they can receive support, education, and resources<sup>90</sup>. These centers provide not only shelter for survivors but also access to vocational training and psychological support. In one region, a grassroots organization reported that over 500 women utilized these Safe Spaces in the last year, and many have gone on to start their own businesses<sup>91</sup>. This initiative not only aids recovery for survivors but also empowers women economically, contributing to long-term resilience against GBV.

### **Legal Advocacy for Survivors**

Grassroots movements have also been instrumental in advocating for the establishment of specialized GBV courts. By lobbying for these courts, which prioritize the speedy and sensitive handling of GBV cases, local organizations have improved the justice process for survivors. Early reports indicate that the introduction of GBV courts has led to a 50%<sup>92</sup> increase in successful prosecutions of GBV cases. This legal reform highlights the critical role grassroots organizations play in shaping justice systems that better serve the needs of women.

### **Collaboration with Local Authorities**

A pivotal case study involves the collaboration between grassroots organizations and local authorities to implement a community policing model that focuses on GBV prevention. This model encourages police officers to engage with communities and build trust, making it easier for survivors to report violence. In one pilot area, communities noted a 40%<sup>93</sup> increase in reported cases of GBV, indicating that survivors felt more comfortable

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Cherry, M., & Hategekimana, V. (2013). Women's empowerment at the grassroots level: A pathway to reducing gender-based violence. *African Journal of Political Science*, 8(1), 45-60

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> N Women. (2021). *The role of international campaigns in combating gender-based violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response>

<sup>91</sup> Spotlight Initiative. (2023). *Creating safe spaces for women and girls: Case studies from the Spotlight Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/resources>

<sup>92</sup> Muthoni, A. (2020). Community-based approaches to addressing gender-based violence in Africa: Lessons from grassroots organizations. *Journal of African Studies*, 12(3), 215-230.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid



coming forward due to improved police-community relations. This collaboration exemplifies how grassroots efforts can enhance local governance and accountability.

### Digital Advocacy Campaigns

In recent years, grassroots organizations have leveraged social media and digital platforms to launch advocacy campaigns against GBV. One notable campaign, which utilized storytelling and personal testimonials, reached over 100,000<sup>94</sup> individuals across various social media platforms. This campaign not only raised awareness but also encouraged survivors to share their stories, fostering a sense of community and support. The digital dimension of grassroots advocacy illustrates how modern tools can amplify local voices and drive global attention to critical issues like GBV<sup>95</sup>.

These case studies underscore the importance of grassroots efforts in driving policy changes and legal reforms that can have a lasting impact on reducing GBV in NWSW Cameroon. By documenting and analysing these successes, the paper can not only highlight effective strategies but also encourage further investment in grassroots movements as critical agents of change in the fight against gender-based violence.

## CONCLUSION

Women's grassroots efforts to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in Cameroon represent a vital response to a pervasive and deeply rooted issue that affects countless individuals and communities. These initiatives are characterized by their focus on empowerment, community mobilization, and advocacy, addressing both the immediate needs of survivors and the systemic factors that perpetuate violence against women.

Despite the significant impact of grassroots organizations, they face numerous challenges, including cultural norms that condone violence, limited funding, political barriers, and societal stigma. These obstacles can hinder their ability to provide essential services and advocate effectively for policy changes. However, the resilience and commitment of these organizations demonstrate the potential for transformative change. By engaging local communities, raising awareness, and fostering dialogues about gender equality, grassroots movements are not only supporting survivors but are also challenging harmful societal norms.

The collaborative efforts of women's organizations, community leaders, and international partners are essential in creating a comprehensive approach to combat GBV. Strengthening these grassroots initiatives through increased funding, training, and policy support can enhance their effectiveness and sustainability. Moreover, fostering an environment where women feel safe to speak out and seek help is crucial for breaking the cycle of violence.

In conclusion, women's grassroots efforts in Cameroon hold the promise of driving meaningful change in the fight against gender-based violence. By continuing to empower women, mobilize communities, and advocate for systemic reforms, these initiatives play a critical role in fostering a society where women and girls can live free from violence and discrimination. The journey towards achieving gender equality and eliminating GBV in Cameroon is ongoing, but with sustained support and commitment, it is a goal that can be realized.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the effectiveness of women's grassroots efforts in combating gender-based violence in Cameroon, several strategic recommendations can be implemented. These suggestions aim to empower grassroots organizations, foster community engagement, and create a more supportive environment for survivors.

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<sup>94</sup> Oduor, J. (2022). The impact of digital advocacy on gender-based violence awareness in Africa. *International Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(2), 89-104.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

1. Grassroots organizations should seek funding from a range of sources, including government grants, private donations, and international NGOs, to reduce reliance on a single funding stream.
2. Provide training for organizations on grant writing and fundraising strategies to enhance their ability to secure financial support.
3. Advocate for the enforcement of existing laws related to GBV and the establishment of comprehensive legislation that protects women's rights and addresses GBV effectively.
4. Grassroots organizations should actively engage with local and national policymakers to influence legislation and ensure that women's issues are prioritized.
5. Offer training programs for staff and volunteers on trauma-informed care, legal advocacy, and community outreach to improve the quality of services provided to survivors.
6. Empower women leaders within grassroots organizations through leadership development programs that enhance their advocacy and organizational skills.
7. Implement community-based awareness campaigns to educate the public about GBV, its consequences, and available support services.
8. Involve men and boys in discussions about gender equality and healthy relationships to challenge harmful norms and promote positive change.
9. Develop safe spaces and support centers where survivors can access counseling, legal aid, and healthcare services in a confidential and supportive environment.
10. Facilitate the creation of peer support networks where survivors can share experiences and provide mutual support.
11. Encourage collaboration among grassroots organizations, NGOs, and community leaders to share resources, knowledge, and best practices.
12. Form coalitions focused on GBV to enhance visibility and amplify the voices of grassroots organizations in national and international platforms.
13. Leverage social media and digital platforms to raise awareness, share resources, and provide information about available services for survivors.
14. Develop online training modules to reach a broader audience and equip community members with knowledge on GBV prevention and response.
15. Implement systems for collecting and analysing data on GBV incidents and the effectiveness of grassroots interventions to inform future strategies.
16. Conduct regular evaluations of programs and initiatives to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

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