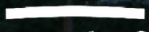
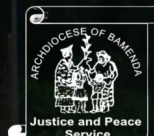


Women Faith-Based Mediators in Cameroon

Challenges and Opportunities
Within Peace Mediation


Berghof Foundation

The Network
for Religious
& Traditional
Peacemakers



This publication is part of the Women Faith-Based Mediators project, led by The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and Berghof Foundation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women faith-based mediators (WFBMs) in Cameroon play a crucial role in addressing religiously motivated conflicts and promoting peace. These mediators are motivated by their faith beliefs and use faith-based approaches to engage in mediation and negotiation processes. They leverage their (shared) faith, traditions and identity as women to build trust, connect with communities, and bridge religious divides. The inclusion of faith in mediation allows for a deeper understanding of the context and facilitates the resolution of disputes based on religious teachings and values.

This case study draws on observations from interviews conducted in 2023 with WFBMs across Cameroon. It is against this background that this WFBM report explores firsthand the challenges, entry points, risks, strategies and specific support of women faith-based mediators in North-West and South-West Cameroon.



Photo: Celebrating International Women's Day in Balikumbat with WFBM.

2. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS AND CONFLICT IN CAMEROON

After the First World War, Cameroon, a former German colony, was divided between the French and English. The English-controlled regions, now known as North-West and South-West (NWSW), had autonomous status under British rule. However, when the NWSW region merged with the French-ruled Republic of Cameroon in 1961, they lost their autonomy. This, combined with historical grievances, led to a sense of marginalization and inadequate representation among Anglophones in political institutions and public services.

Tensions in Cameroon remained relatively high but stable until October 2016, when protests erupted after lawyers, teachers and students took to the streets following the appointment of Francophone judges in English-speaking areas of the Republic of Cameroon. The military responded forcefully, resulting in casualties. Further, this sparked the emergence of militant armed movements seeking independence for ‘Ambazonia,’ a political entity proclaimed by Anglophone separatists who are seeking independence from Cameroon within the Anglophone NWSW regions.

Over time, the Ambazonia Defense Forces, also known as ‘Amba’ or ‘Amba boys,’ fragmented into different factions. After six years, the ‘Aglophone Crisis,’ in Cameroon reached a deadlock with over 6,800 casualties, hundreds of thousands displaced and nearly 600,000 children not receiving an education. The government has rejected its own internal peace efforts as well as third-party peace initiatives. The Major National Dialogue in 2019, held between the Government of Cameroon and various opposition parties, was met with limited acceptance and trust.

The NWSW regions, particularly areas such as Bamenda, Mendankwe, Mbouda, Bafoussam and Dschage continue to experience extensive armed violence. Civilians face major risks such as kidnapping, rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, property damage and ambushes. They find themselves caught among the Amba group, which targets them for financial support as well as for retaliation and criminal activities. The military is suspicious of civilians collaborating with armed groups and responds with reprisals, including burning homes after attacks. The prevailing insecurity and complexity of the situation contributes to the settling of scores and attracts opportunistic individuals who exploit the crisis for personal gain through blackmail and corruption.



Photo: Partner visit to WFBM in Bambalang. N. W Prgion.

The most prominent religious group in Cameroon is the Catholic Church, making up approximately 50 percent of the population. Muslims and Protestants, including Presbyterian, Baptist, and Gospel, also have relevant numbers of believers, reaching about 25 percent of the population. Ancestral beliefs are also strongly present in parts of the population.

Due to the religious influence on everyday society, religious and traditional leaders naturally play a guiding role in society and hold personal access to communities, as well as amongst armed groups and high-ranking government officials.¹ In recognizing their influence, religious leaders have been engaged in attempts to transform the conflict, such as through the All-Anglophone General Conference, which was initiated in 2018 by the late Cardinal Tumi. Unfortunately, these endeavors have not proven successful in ending the conflict.

We tell the military that there are the effects of traditions and of traditional medicines and powers. For protection, the people use protective symbols. For example, they mark a line on the street and everybody who crosses the line with bad intention will be punished and affected by the tradition.

Nawain Mayen Immaculate

¹ Godwill Ncham, Baptist Reverend, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 21 February 2023 in Bamenda.

While the Catholic faith is the dominant faith among the Amba population, Islam and traditional faiths do have relevant leverage as well. ‘Most of the boys have respect for the religious authorities, local priests, for Imams and Fons.’² Confronted with them, they will act calmly and respectfully,’ shares Wilfred Sanji Nche,³ a youth leader who is closely working with Amba for their demobilization. Additionally, many fighters adhere to traditionally inspired notions of ‘bad spirits,’ which can often take the form of negative signs and power of spirits. Atim Evenye,⁴ Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, explained these spirits can be intertwined with a ‘women on her period, a marked circle, or shaking pendulums and doodoos.’ These suspicion’s creates very difficult and dangerous situations for WFBMs⁵ when negotiating with armed groups, as their actions may be interpreted with negative spiritual connotations and beliefs.

At the same time, these beliefs help to contain violence. As the Princess and traditional authority, Nawain Mayen Immaculate explains, ‘We tell the military that there are the effects of traditions and of traditional medicines and powers. For protection, the people use protective symbols. For example, they mark a line on the street and everybody who crosses the line with bad intention will be punished and affected by the tradition.’⁶

² Traditional authority in the North-West of Cameroon.

³ Wilfred Nche, Youth leader, Catholic, below 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 20 February 2023 in Bamenda.

⁴ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

⁵ Within the frame of this study ‘Women faith based mediators and negotiators’ are working on various tracks for ceasing violence and finding agreements to prevent and stop violence. They convene stakeholder, liaise, and negotiate with armed groups and relevant decision makers for ensuring humanitarian access, safe lives and release hostages. In doing this work, their tools and methods are inspired by faith, and/or they are cooperating within or with faith-based structures and/or with faith-based actors, and/or they are gaining motivation and inspiration for this work through faith.”

⁶ Nawain Mayen Immaculate, Princess of Kom, above 35, Christian/ Traditionalist, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

3. WOMEN, RELIGION AND MEDIATION

Women can, and often do have strong public roles in Cameroon, such as opinion leaders, non-governmental organization directors, mediators and politicians. Generally, WFBMs play a crucial role in negotiating school re-openings, providing humanitarian assistance and medical support, and are trusted authorities for handing in weapons.⁷ Despite their valuable contributions in the background, very few women publicly engage in peace processes related to the current crisis.

Many of the traditional structures in Cameroon, and within NWSW have matrilineal systems, which gives women (and their kids) a crucial role within the family and broader society. However, while the younger generation of women are more assertive, they are often also challenged within the patriarchal structures and lack of authority, as authority is often synonymous with age.⁸ Other traditional beliefs and institutions recognize the traditionally backed authority of elderly women. The so-called 'Takumbeng,' is a social movement in the North-West region of Cameroon comprised of mostly elderly women, who have the role of regulating the society in the North-West of Cameroon. To regulate a serious offense or crisis within a community, Takumbeng, the mothers of the nation, will gather as a group and use outlandish behavior to ostracize individuals and highlight the severity of the offence. In many instances, this may take the form of nudity to express their concern and anger and emphasize the shame of immoral practices, which are disruptive for or against the values and cohesion of the community.⁹

Similarly, within the current armed conflict, women have a prominent role in advocating for peace and non-violence. In what is known as 'Lamentation Campaigns,' more than 4500 women will dress in black and protest the ongoing violence and for reopening of schools. 'We as mothers' gather to fight for our children and protest against the violence against our children,' shares Esther Omam, a prominent peace advocate and negotiator and the leader of these protests.¹⁰

The strength of patriarchal structures differ in various parts of society, with more prevalence in religious structures and settings.¹¹ In some traditions in Cameroon, women have a very weak position, and many women existentially depends on their husbands. For example, under Cameroon's patriarchal customary law system, once a husband dies, the widows are deprived of almost any rights to inheriting property and are excluded from the community.¹²

We as mothers' gather to fight for our children and protest against the violence against our children.

Esther Omam

⁷ Godwill Ncham, Baptist Reverend, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023 in Bamenda.

⁸ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

⁹ Godwill Ncham, Baptist Reverend, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023 in Bamenda.

¹⁰ Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023 in Buea.

¹¹ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

¹² Nawain Mayen Immaculate, Princess of Kom, North-West Region, above 35, Christian/Traditionalist, interviewed: February 20, 2023 in Bamenda.

The context of conflict in the NWSW of Cameroon is very dynamic and constantly changing. WFBMs do not deliberately choose to deal with armed groups, government officials or the military. WFBMs are often trapped in areas where gunshots, kidnapping, assassinations, and other heinous violations happen. Reverend Sr. Patience Muring, the head of the La Verna Spiritual Center, shares how she has connected with armed groups in her community, ‘You often meet the boys out there, they live here in the neighborhood [...]. We had a lot of fears at the beginning, now the boys and the war became something we live with, try to be at home, we just face it.’¹³

WFBMs in Cameroon often participate in community dialogues to mitigate these conflicts and raise topics as it relates to the welfare of their community.¹⁴ Some WFBMs have a successful record of negotiating a variety of conflicts, whether it be armed, or community based, and are acknowledged in this capacity. In recognizing their role, WFBMs were successfully engaged in talks on local and national levels on practices to reopen schools, as exemplified by Rekyatu Mbapeh, a Muslim community leader in the rural surroundings of Bamenda. Because of her negotiation efforts, over 480 pupils are enrolled in the local school. It was agreed that the school would re-opened without control by the state. Another example is Reverend Sr. Patience Muring and her Catholic sister nuns, who successfully negotiated permanent humanitarian passage for ill and wounded persons who need to quickly reach the hospital within the Amba controlled territory. Esther Oman also successfully prevented violence between women protestors and the military following the 2018 peaceful protests regarding the death of children in Buea and Kumba. ‘They know me as a woman of

faith, and I showed them a peace plant. This is how I convinced them to not get closer to the military check points. When talking to the women, I was talking about Gods’ word,’ Esther explained.

WFBMs understand themselves as religious and faith-based actors. Often, WFBMs have a strong feeling and a concrete vocation for what they are doing, stemming from religious teachings, which emphasizes passion, not being selfish and working to support their neighbor for the advancement of the common good.¹⁵ Some WFBMs feel ‘blessed’ or even ‘chosen’ when they have an opportunity to fill these roles and make positive change in their communities. ‘I am an instrument in the hands of God,’ shares Esther Omam. Esther has effectively negotiated humanitarian access to rebel-controlled areas, the cessation of violence as well as the reopening of schools with different levels of Amba leadership in Cameroon. ‘Many are called, but a few are chosen. I think I am one of the few,’ explains Esther.¹⁶ For many WFBMs, faith is the crucial element of their motivation; they feel the commandment to work for positive change, ending and preventing violence, releasing hostages, getting access to the communities, while accepting extremely difficult and endangering situations.

¹³ Patience Muring, Reverend Sr. and Head of the TSSF La Verna Spiritual Center, Catholic, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023, in Bamenda.

¹⁴ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

¹⁵ Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea; Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023 online.

¹⁶ Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea; Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023 online.

*I am representing the Catholic church
where I am going, it legitimizes me.*

Laura Anyola Tufon

When mediation efforts are sometimes integrated through places of worship or other faith-based institutions, it has the potential to create trust and credibility.¹⁷ People generally believe that faith-based mediators have integrity and work to pursue the common good.¹⁸ Despite not having the same institutional legitimacy as male religious leaders and mediators, WFBMs thrive from the legitimacy of the official structures they are associated with. Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West Regional Coordinator of the Peace and Justice Commission of the Archdioceses in Bamenda, observes, ‘I am representing the Catholic church where I am going, it legitimizes me.’¹⁹

The faith of WFBMs inspires their emphatic way of communicating with the armed groups. ‘I do not talk violently to them. I go with the consciousness that we want peace, and that we have to embrace them,’ shares Reverend Sr. Patience Muring. ‘Many of the armed fighters feel to be ‘dead people,’ and that nobody wants or loves them. We (...) try to put some love. If they are loved, this helps them to feel as humans.’²⁰ Religiously inspired words and sentences support this way of communicating. Reverend Sr. Patience tells them that ‘they are loved by people, and they are loved by God: God loves all of us. God loves you, (John 3:16).’

¹⁷ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

¹⁸ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

¹⁹ Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West regional coordinator of the Commission on Justice and Peace of Diocese Bamenda, above 34, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 19, 2023, in Bamenda.

²⁰ Patience Muring, Reverend Sr. and Head of the TSSF La Verna Spiritual Center, Catholic, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023 in Bamenda.

Only a few though, would explicitly understand themselves as ‘WFBMs.’ Many have difficulties to relating to the term ‘mediator.’ The term ‘religious’ or ‘faith-based mediator’ is associated with formal religious institutions, of which only few are officially part of. In addition, the institutions often strengthens the association and leadership with ‘men’ and ‘religious leaders.’²¹ However, some women do explicitly identify with faith-based mediation or negotiation. “I am a frontline negotiator who is attached to a religious system and belief. Religion is what I always bring to the line,” Atim Evenye describes herself. As head of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation (AMEF), she regularly negotiates with armed groups for access to different communities.²²

Despite the nuanced opinions on labeling themselves, or not, women see value in the label ‘WFBM,’ as it relates to, ‘recognizing and acknowledging the role which women and faith-based women are playing in mediation and the field of peace work.’²³ By giving it a name, the term confirms the relevance and context for how WFBMs are conducting their efforts, which is strongly inspired by faith and engaging from an explicitly faith-based perspective.²⁴

²¹ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023 in Bamenda.; Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

²² Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

²³ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

²⁴ Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

4. NAVIGATING RISKS AND CHALLENGES

WFBMs encounter significant risks and challenges when engaging in the field due to patriarchal structures, skepticism, limited legitimacy and influence as well as age discrimination.

Weak institutional authority of WFBMs and lack of access to funding and resources

Religious institutions and structures are male dominated and patriarchal.²⁵ In these structures, faith-based women encounter the challenge to be heard, and also be meaningfully included in any legitimate roles within the church. The same is true for traditional settings and traditional rulers who are not willing to listen and accept the contributions of WFBMs.²⁶

If it is about making decisions, the youth are seen to be the problem, and are not given the chance to make proposition to solve the problems.

Patience Ngam

²⁵ Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West regional coordinator of the Commission on Justice and Peace of Diocese Bamenda, above 34, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 19/02/2023 in Bamenda; Clotilda Andiensa, Gender.

²⁶ Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West regional coordinator of the Commission on Justice and Peace of Diocese Bamenda, above 34, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 19/02/2023 in Bamenda; Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

For young people and in particular young women, it is generally difficult to have a role in the Cameroonian society, when the role is related to decision-making power, residing with men or elder women.²⁷ While youth are at the forefront of the conflict, they are generally not included in mediation or peace efforts. 'If it is about making decisions, the youth are seen to be the problem, and are not given the chance to make proposition to solve the problems.'²⁸ Young women, often considered below the age 35, are not heard and often not included.²⁹



Photo: Group work with Catholic Women Organization as Faith Mediators in Bamenda 2018.

²⁷ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

²⁸ Patience Ngam, Youth leader, below 35, Baptist, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 20/02/2023 in Bamenda.

²⁹ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

There is also strong competition observed in respect to resources and funding among secular women mediators and WFBMs.³⁰ Partly, WFBMs feel sidelined by secular actors and organizations in the competition for resources to fund activities as well as for involvement into activities.³¹ This is especially true for young women. Secular actors, as well as people of other traditional beliefs and faiths, are also less inclined to listen to or partner with individuals with very strong or differing faith backgrounds.³²

Skepticism of faith-based communities, including women, towards politics

In particular for Protestant traditions, such as Baptists and Presbyterians, the purpose of religion is seen to be in worshipping God. Having public leadership roles, partly related to influencing political violence and conflicts, are often perceived as being profane and even “evil”. In particular, faith-based women often do not see their purpose and role in public service or politics, but in dedicating their life to God and the community, serving in humility. As Esther Omam, a Baptist believer, observes in respect to her public role and the reaction of her community: ‘they feel that with my actions I am getting too far from worshipping, which is the role of believers, as many see it.’³³

30 Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023 in Bamenda; Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West regional coordinator of the Commission on Justice and Peace of Diocese Bamenda, above 34, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: 19/02/2023 in Bamenda; Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West region, interviewed: February 18, 2023 in Buea.

31 Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023 in Bamenda; Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023 online.

32 Wilfred Nche, Youth leader, Catholic, below 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

33 Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

Physical and psychological security, risks and trauma

WFBMs take risks when engaging with armed actors in very unstable, complex, and unclear situations. Being faith-based women allows them at the one hand, to be perceived less threatening and to have a smaller chance to be physically harmed. On the other hand, WFBMs face gender-specific risks of rape, sexualization and sexual harassment. WFBMs are exposed to serious risks of being kidnapped, ambushed, blackmailed, threatened with a gun, or seriously harmed by armed groups and the military. Reverend Sr. Patience and her Catholic nun sisters, stated that despite their clear and explicit faith-based role, which has authority in the community and have a comparatively ‘good’ relationship with Amba, they are still exposed to major physical risks. The Amba took them to the camps on different occasions and beat and shot at them and burned their cars.³⁴

The constant security risks can cause harmful psychosocial risks for WFBMs, including a high risk of being traumatized. Furthermore, talking and dealing with armed groups on a regular basis, while also residing and operating in extremely difficult situations for their mental and physical health, implies heavy psychosocial loads for the WFBMs as well.³⁵

34 Patience Muring, Reverend Sr. and Head of the TSSF La Verna Spiritual Center, Catholic, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023 in Bamenda; Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 3, 2023, online; Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

35 Patience Muring, Reverend Sr. and Head of the TSSF La Verna Spiritual Center, Catholic, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20 2023, in Bamenda; Atim Evenye, Leader of an NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 3, 2023, online.

Risks of losing credibility and neutrality

Esther Omam went to the United States at her personal expense to engage in mediation with Amba leaders to request to lift the ban on schools. She feels that, ‘It was very important that I was able to prove my financial and organizational independence.’ Despite many offers from different international institutions, Esther organized and funded her travel independently to ensure her credibility and neutrality would not be questioned by Amba leaders.³⁶ Individuals and organizations Associations acting on their own account are easier to be accepted by Amba leaders than agencies working through and with the Cameroonian government.³⁷



Photo: Experience sharing in mediation in Bafanji, North West region.

³⁶ Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

³⁷ Atim Evenye, Leader of an NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH WFBMS

Continuing to build the confidence and capacities of WFBMs

Being a WFBM allows them to mediate and advocate for the mitigation of violence with armed groups and military actors in situations where even faith-based men could not do so. WFBMs in these cases bare a reduced risk to be seriously harmed or killed as compared to men since they are perceived as less threatening. Reverend Sr. Patience Muring reflects about the opportunities of faith-based men and women, when talking and negotiating with the Amba, ‘I think men could not really talk to the boys as we are talking to the boys. At the moment, they are so stressed and agitated, I think if it was any man, they would just kill.’³⁸

I think men could not really talk to the boys as we are talking to the boys. At the moment, they are so stressed and agitated, I think if it was any man, they would just kill.

Reverend Sr. Patience Muring

³⁸ Patience Muring, Reverend Sr. and Head of the TSSF La Verna Spiritual Center, Catholic, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023, in Bamenda.

If you call God, he answers, it will work.

Rekyatu Mbapeh

WFBMs are also generally perceived as actors trying to advance the common good, rather than working to obtain personal benefits. This, for example, shows when Esther Omam and many other women are gathering ‘as mothers’ to protest and advocate for the end of violence in powerful ‘Lamentation Campaigns’ the NWSW of Cameroon.³⁹ The ‘image of mothers’ gives them specific authority and protects them when fulfilling this role, which strongly exposes them in a very violent prone setting.⁴⁰

WFBMs often operate outside of the official structures because of their limited formal roles within faith-based institutions. Due to their lack of official engagement, WFBMs can be included more easily based on their personal capacity, such as in interreligious initiatives.⁴¹ Esther Omam, for example, was included in the ‘All-Anglophone General Conference (AGC)’ without her specific faith-based background being considered.⁴² Operating outside of the official structures entails the opportunity to act more inclusively, even when religion is part of defining conflict lines.

Many WFBMs gain confidence from their faith to engage in highly sensitive situations with very powerful and often threatening interlocutors, ‘If you call God, he answers, it will work,’⁴³ states Rekyatu Mbapeh, on the role of faith in the different negotiations she led. WFBMs believe that God will help them to find the right words and actions,⁴⁴ as experienced by Esther Omam when she had the chance to talk to separatist leaders in 2019 in Maryland of the United States. When she left the house, she prayed, ‘Give me the right word to speak, to introduce myself...’ During the negotiations, the separatists were very harsh on her and ‘tried to break [...] [her] psychologically,’ but she resisted, ‘was calm, I had prayed before and this made me very at ease and able to stay with myself!’⁴⁵

39 Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

40 Hayward Susan and Marshall Katherine eds. *Women, Religion, and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2015, page 19.

41 Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

42 Goodwill Ncham, Baptist Reverend, above 35, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 21, 2023, in Bamenda.

43 Rekyatu Mbapeh, community leader, Muslim, rural surroundings of Bamenda (Mile 90), North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

44 Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea. Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online; Rekyatu Mbapeh, community leader, Muslim, rural surroundings of Bamenda (Mile 90), North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023 in Bamenda.

45 Esther Omam, Executive Director of Reach-out Cameroon, above 35, Pentecostal, Buea, South-West Region, interviewed: February 18, 2023, in Buea.

Connecting WFBMs with interreligious communities and women's networks

It is imperative to connect WFBMs with people from other faiths to increase legitimacy, access, and collaboration. This could include creating an interreligious platform with people from different backgrounds. WFBMs have had success with the Community Peace Ambassadors, 'in which all the churches, including Catholic, Baptists, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, were involved, enabling increased outreach.'⁴⁶ While faith is crucial to establish relationships and trust, it can also be predicated on relatability and mutual social networks. For instance, in Cameroon, trust may stem from speaking the same dialect or to be from the same area.⁴⁷

Many WFBMs also expressed the need and desire to exchange with peers on their psychosocial, organizational, security, technical expertise related challenges. This would include a safe space to obtain advice from peers.⁴⁸ Engaging broader women's networks have also helped WFBMs be successful in accessing communities through building communication channels with other WFBMs and their networks, ultimately building trust and creating bridges.

When Laura Anyola Tufon was working to overcome deadly local conflict among the two communities of Bali and Bawock in the surroundings of Bamenda, she relied on her preexisting faith based and social women networks. By working through these women networks, and utilizing religious scriptures, she was able to establish trust and relevant communication channels with the traditional authorities from both sides to stop the violence.⁴⁹

Ensuring physical and psychological wellbeing

WFBMs employ a wide range of security measures to safeguard their risky tasks. They prioritize careful communication, screen their interactions, and set clear objectives before heading into the field to prevent misunderstandings and expose themselves to further danger. Breaking routines and establishing security networks help them stay unidentifiable and untraceable. While some WFBMs receive support from organizations that track them in insecure areas, many lack secure transportation, communication, and information gathering mechanisms. Despite being perceived as less threatening, WFBMs face gender-specific risks like rape and harassment. Due to constant security threats and exposure to violence, they also express the need for psychosocial support and seek training in non-violent communication and negotiation techniques to ensure their safety while engaging with armed actors.

⁴⁶ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

⁴⁷ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

⁴⁸ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

⁴⁹ Laura Anyola Tufon, North-West regional coordinator of the Commission on Justice and Peace of Diocese Bamenda, above 34, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 19, 2023, in Bamenda.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WFBMs in Cameroon play a critical role in promoting peace and resolving conflicts in both religious and secular contexts. Their faith and identity as women allow them to connect with communities and build trust and legitimacy. Despite challenges including a patriarchal system, security resits and political connotations, WFBMs can bring about sustainable change within their communities.

Recommendations provided by WFBMs

- 1 Recognize and acknowledge the achievements of WFBMs.** The effectiveness of WFBMs in mediating and negotiating is under-explored and overseen. Being acknowledged by the international community will allow WFBMs to strengthen their credibility and engagement within communities. Recognizing and acknowledging the past experiences and achievements of WFBMs is essential to understanding their capabilities.
- 2 Support existing structures of engagement and offer specific resources for the work of WFBMs without fostering competition.** WFBMs appreciate the term Women Faith-Based Mediators and Negotiators, ('WFBM') due to the acknowledgment that it, 'adds more value to the work of women faith-based mediators and giving it a name.'⁵⁰ This is why it is important to categorize their work through this lens while not creating a strong competition for resources and funding observed among secular and explicitly faith-based actors and organizations.⁵¹
- 3 Support WFBM and broader women's networks to engage in mediation and broader peacebuilding work.** This includes their participation and leadership within broader interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding.
- 4 Ensure the independence and neutrality of WFBMs.** WFBMs need to continue to be perceived as financially independent mediators. In the case of Cameroon, the independence from government entities is crucial.
- 5 Offer security and mental health training and psychosocial support for WFBMs.** This includes offering non-violent communication and negotiation techniques to ensure their safety while engaging with armed actors.

⁵⁰ Atim Evenye, Leader of the NGO Authentic Memorial Empowerment Foundation, below 35, Pentecostal, South-West region, interviewed: March 2, 2023, online.

⁵¹ Clotilda Andiensa, Gender equality and development activist, above 35, Catholic, Bamenda, North-West Region, interviewed: February 20, 2023, in Bamenda.

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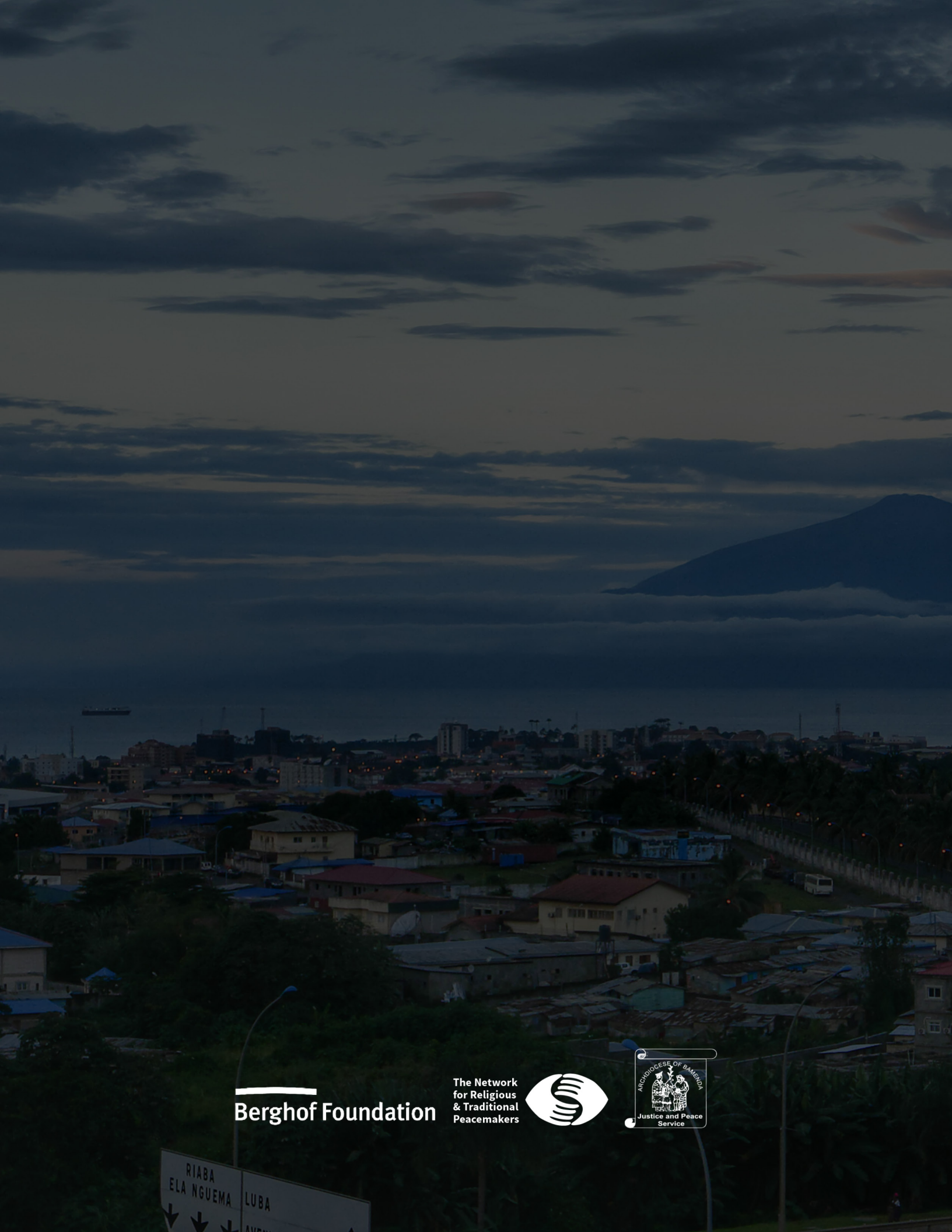
ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

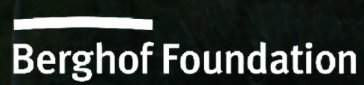
Laura Anyola Tufon has extensive experience in program and project development, as well as a deep commitment to human rights and gender equality. She is a dedicated and passionate faith-based mediator with a strong commitment to fostering peace and reconciliation. Laura has actively worked to empower local peace committees and communities in their efforts to resolve conflicts and build harmonious relationships. Throughout her career, Laura has played a pivotal role in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, working in diverse settings affected by conflict and social unrest. Driven by a deep sense of justice and compassion, she has worked tirelessly to combat the heinous crime of human trafficking and provide a lifeline to its victims. And her collaboration with law enforcement agencies, she has been able to identify and rescue vulnerable children who have been subjected to exploitation and abuse, earning her the 2013 Hero Acting to End Modern-Day Slavery Award by the US Department of State.



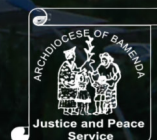
About Justice and Peace Commission

The Justice and Peace Commission, as a pastoral structure of Evangelization, has as aim to help in building up a just and peaceful society by promoting all that enhances the dignity of the human person, combating and denouncing all that degrades and destroys the human person, and by resolving conflicts. They believe in a transformed society whose systems and structures are dedicated to working for justice, building peace, and promoting socially sustainable development in the light of the Gospel and the Social Teaching of the Church.



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